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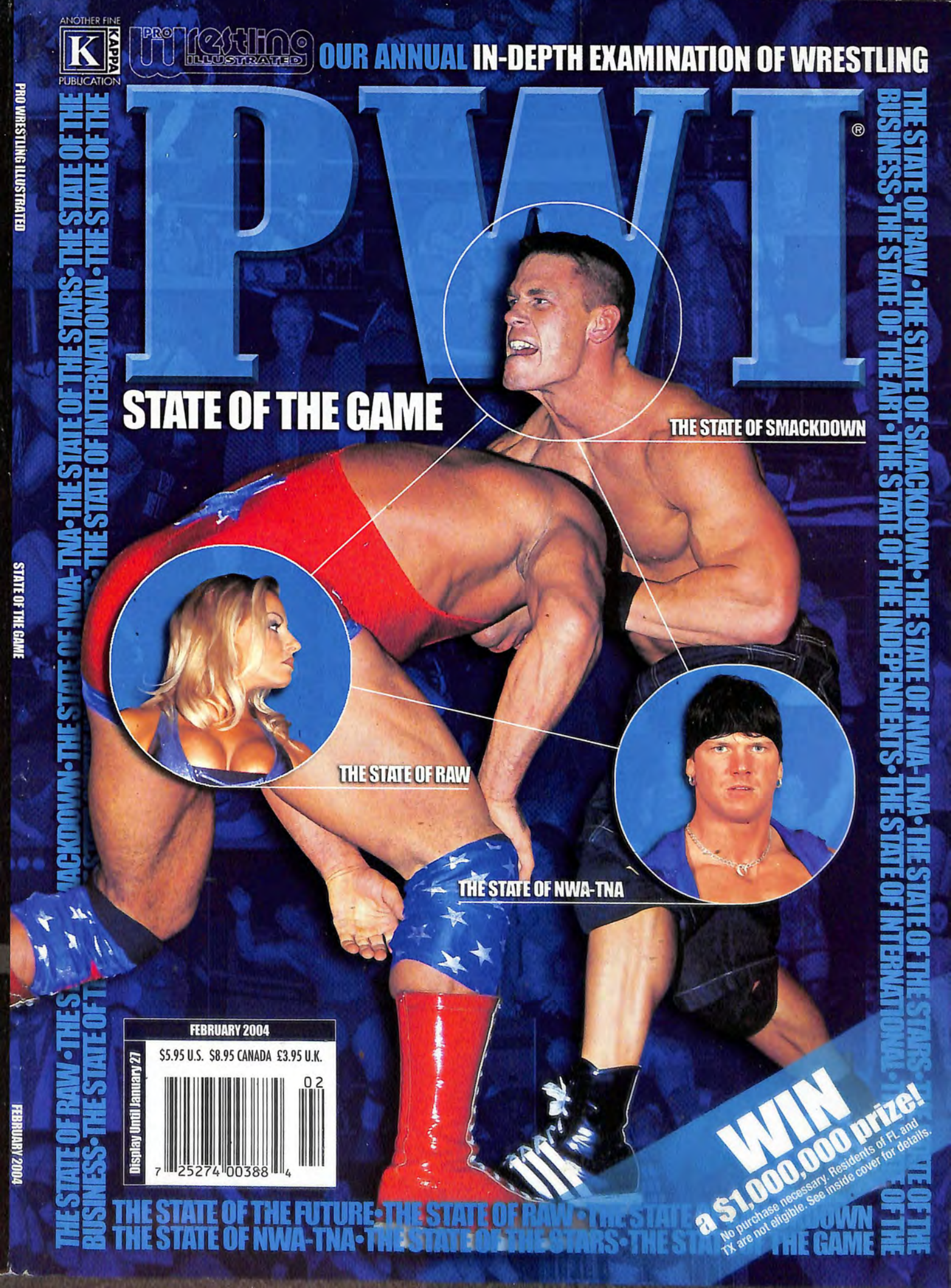

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THE STATE OF RAW

THE STATE OF NWA-TNA

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6397

from the desk of...

YEARS FROM NOW, long after those who experienced first-hand The Road Warriors' precision power teamwork and superhuman intensity are gone, wrestling people might be a little dumbfounded as to why this team was rated the very best this sport has ever seen.

Surely, the record book won't offer much help. It will tell researchers that Hawk and Animal were the only team to have worn the world tag team belts of what was for a generation wrestling's Big Three—the AWA, NWA, and WWF. But those accomplishments will be minimized by the fact that they won the belts only four times for a combined reign of two years, and that of the four teams they beat to win the titles, only one, Bobby Eaton and Stan Lane, might be on anybody's all-time Top 100 Tag Teams list.

Maybe future historians will draw the conclusion that those who ranked the "Legion Of Doom" so highly were just plain wrong, that they had bought in to the hype that inspired *PWI* readers to select Hawk and Animal Tag Team of the Year four times in the 1980s. There was, indeed, a measure of hype that went into the establishment of The Road Warriors' legend. But it wasn't the kind of hype that promoters create or reporters perpetuate. Call it "natural hype." There was an hysteria that accompanied Hawk and Animal, partly because they were so intimidating, but more because they were unique. The best way for me to describe them at their peak would be to call Mike Tyson The Road Warriors of boxing.

Their strategy was to assault their opponents with a combination of speed and strength that was rarely before found in any single wrestler—and never in a tag team. Like Tyson, they took advantage of the anxiety that would attack an opponent from the inside out, and then they'd finish the job quickly, usually accompanied by the chime of the opening bell.

It will take a perceptive historian to uncover what might be the most important indication of just how brilliant The Road Warriors were. Look at the names of the duos who finished in the runner-up spots in the Tag Team of the Year voting the years they won: the Von Erichs, The Freebirds, Jack & Jerry Brisco (1983); the Von Erichs, The Fabulous Ones, The Rock 'n' Roll Express (1984); Ted DiBiase & Steve Williams, Ivan & Nikita Koloff, The British Bulldogs (1985); The Midnight Express, Demolition, Tully Blanchard & Arn Anderson (1989). The Road Warriors were by far the most dominant team during history's most dominant era of tag team wrestling.

Michael "Hawk" Hegstrand died on October 19 at his home near Clearwater, Florida at age 46. The cause at press time was unknown. But that might be the only thing about him that was unknown. His ring style told you all you needed to know about his professional philosophy and his acceptance of Jesus as his savior told you all you needed to know about his personal philosophy. In all facets of his life, he always knew exactly where he was headed. My sincerest hope is that he has found his way.

Stu Saks
Publisher

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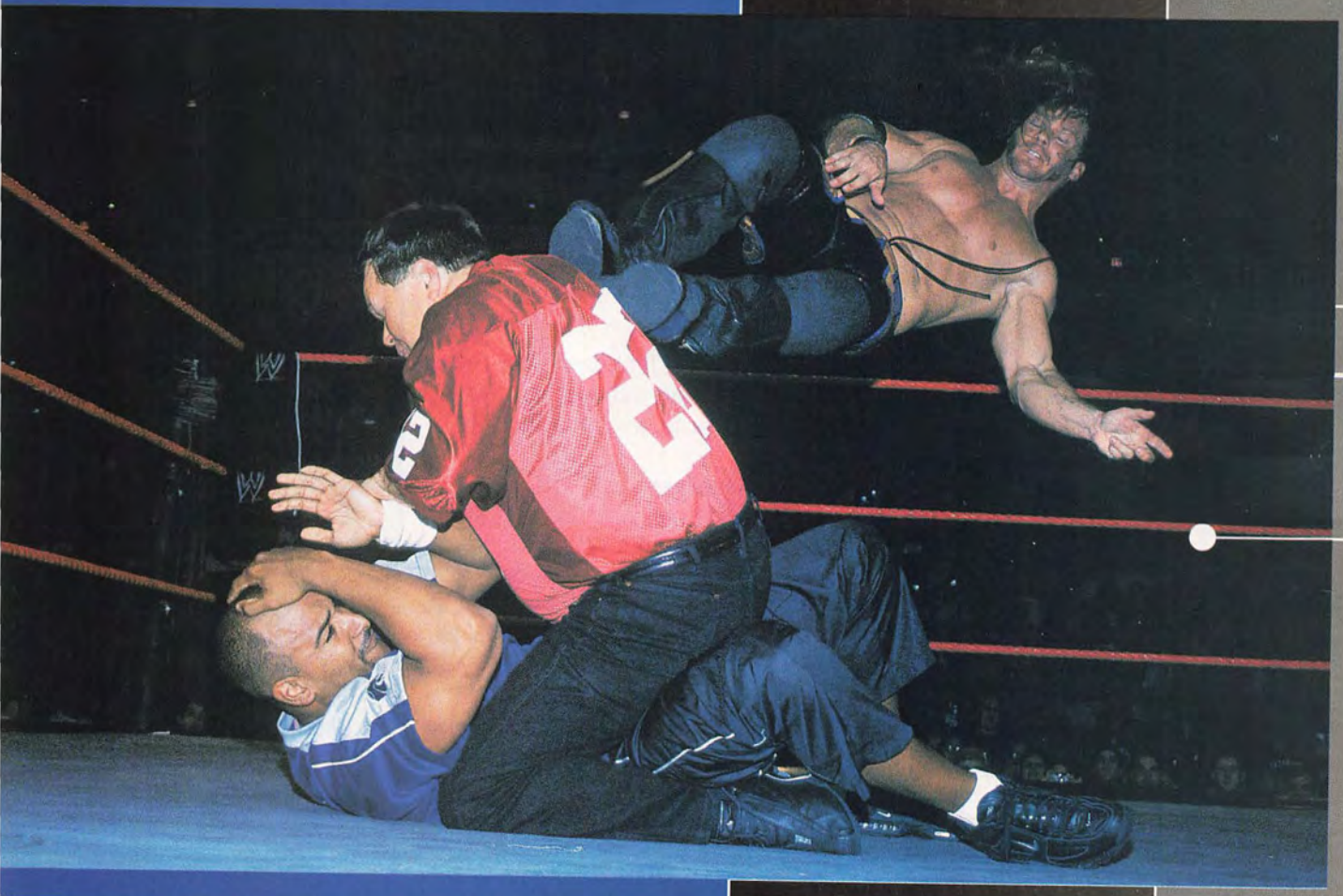

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February 2004

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John Cena vs. Kurt Angle by Mark Hill
A.J. Styles by Vern Verna
Trish Stratus by Joe Zanolle

COVER DESIGN:
Greg Stevens

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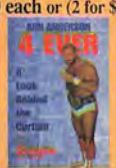

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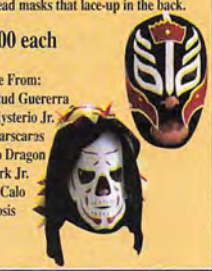

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Compiled by Will Welsh

Rappin' With Randy

"Macho Man" Randy Savage has a problem: He's a forgotten legend. Sure, there are still a few "Macho Maniacs" waiting for him to make a surprise appearance on *Raw* or *Smackdown* and deliver his trademark flying elbow off the top rope onto Vince McMahon, but as the years go by without WWE calling, the chances of a return get slimmer and slimmer. In fact, Jim Ross, WWE's vice president of talent relations, recently went on the record to say he doesn't expect to see Savage in WWE anytime soon, not even for WrestleMania XX.

Of course, that hasn't stopped Savage from trying to politick his way back onto wrestling's national stage. Over the past few months, he has visited radio station after radio station in an attempt to get his name out there…

… and plug his new CD …

… his new *rap* CD …

… in which he calls out Hulk Hogan …

… and tells him to be a man …

… repeatedly!

Oh, how we wish we were making this up. We'd feel a lot more comfortable if Savage would just quietly settle into retirement and go feed ducks stale bread at the local pond, but that simply isn't to be. Instead, his new CD, *Be A Man,* is likely his best attempt to get enough publicity to convince WWE that he's worth one last run—against Hogan. In the title track, Savage tries to re-ignite their once-explosive feud:

"Used to be hard, Hulk, now you turned soft
Doin' telephone commercials, I seen ya
Dancin' in tights as a ballerina
I knew all along you had those tendencies
'Cause you been running from 'Macho' like I had a disease."

Good grief. You know, we're willing to gamble that Hogan, upon hearing the song, didn't call his agent and ask him to set up a match pronto. Instead, he probably sat back and had a good laugh while trying to figure what his long-time rival would do next to try to get his attention next.

Now, we would be remiss if we didn't tell you that Savage doesn't spend the entire CD freestyling on Hogan. There are 13 songs on the CD that aren't focused on Hogan, and some of them are quite risky (yes, even for this CD), such as "Perfect Friend," in which Savages pays tribute to Curt Hennig, and "Pretty Lady," his attempt at a rap ballad in which he sings:

"I wanna keep ya happy,
Not just financially, but mentally, physically, romantically
I know it's funny, 'cause I'm usually slammin' cats
Elbow off the top rope in a wrestling match
But you bring out another side of me."

Ah, the things that the combination of true love and a good helping of desperation can produce.

Musically, the production is quite good actually. Unfortunately, it's not great, which is what it had to be in order for the listener to get past the fact that it's Savage, with his deep, scratchy voice, playing the role of MC. It's not a role with which he's comfortable, which is probably why, during a promotional concert, he was booed off the stage after the CD to which he was lip-synching started to skip.

Savage gets an "A" for effort, but unless you're a collector of the strange and awful, this CD probably isn't for you. Give it just one suplex out of a possible five.

Talkin' Trash

Here's a list of the top 10 wrestling-related things you've been talking about lately, and our gut reaction to each:

10. Shane McMahon breaks Test's foot with his version of the Van terminator. Test is injured? This has to be a good thing for Stacy Keibler! Now she only has to deal with one maniacal madman. Let's celebrate! It's picture time, folks!

9. Hulk Hogan comes to terms with NWA-TNA. *Hmmmmmm,* doesn't bode well for Vince Russo's future with the company, does it?

8. Shane McMahon traps Kane inside a limousine, then sends the limo careening into an 18-wheeler, severely injuring "The Big Red Machine." How many limos have WWE wrestlers wrecked over the years? Ten? Twenty? Whatever the number is, it's too many. Oh, yeah, by the way, Shane shouldn't try to kill WWE wrestlers, either. That's bad, too.

7. Eddie Guerrero vs. The Big Show. A lot of fans were critical of Guerrero's gastrointestinal torture of Show, but we think anything a wrestler can do to make the 500-pounder a little lighter before meeting him in a match is fair game.

6. Vampiro debuts for NWA-TNA. You remember Vampiro, don't you? He's the guy from WCW who wore white face paint and made a career out of sulking around the ring. However, just for clarification, he wasn't the guy from WCW who wore white face paint and made a career out of sulking around the ring while carrying a baseball bat. That guy was Sting. Got it now?

5. Rob Van Dam captures the Intercontinental championship. How much do you want to bet RVD doesn't hold the I-C title as long as he held the ECW TV championship? We'll bet a million-gazillion dollars!

4. Dutch Mantel joins NWA-TNA's creative team. *Hmmmmmm,* doesn't bode well for Vince Russo's future with the company, does it?

3. Vince McMahon vs. Stephanie McMahon. One word: creepy.

2. Triple-H offers $100,000 to any person who can incapacitate WWE Raw champion Bill Goldberg. Okay, we admit it: We had to stop The Murph from trying to collect.

1. The Rock receives rave reviews for his performance in *The Rundown.* Later, Rock. Nice knowing ya.

The Internet Insider

The following news items were culled from various wrestling-related Web sites—or were they? See if you can pick out the two items that were actually reported on the Internet (which doesn't necessarily mean that they are true) and the two that we blatantly made up. The answers appear at the end of this column on page 11.

1. Though this received very little coverage thanks to all the other celebrities entered into the California recall election for the state's governorship, California citizen Rob Van Dam was on the ballot. Shockingly enough, RVD received exactly 420 votes. Though some Van Dam detractors believe that this was staged and that RVD planned on getting exactly 420 votes, Van Dam's camp said that it was some kind of freakish coincidence.

2. WWE was briefly in talks with the management of rapper Eminem in an attempt to entice him to perform at WrestleMania XX. Despite a serious financial offering, Eminem's representatives turned down the offer, citing WWE's lack of social responsibility. Said one representative: "We can't let Em associate himself with such a controversial company. He has a reputation to uphold."

3. A wrestler called El Plateado, billed as the grandson of El Santo, debuted on September 11 in Naucalpan, Mexico, for the IWRG promotion. El Plateado used to wrestle under the name Axxel and is a legitimate grandson of Santo. And not only that, he's also married to the daughter of the original Huracan Ramirez.

4. During a WWE house show in Chattanooga, Tennessee, a fan who was a dead-on ringer for Buff Bagwell garnered a lot of attention. Everyone in the building thought it was Bagwell, including local promoter Terry Landell and others involved with local indy wrestling. When they went to talk to him, they noticed he looked a little different and his voice was different, but it wasn't until he was unable to recognize people that the real Bagwell should have known that they figured out he was an impostor.

This Month in Wrestling History

February

February 6, 1877: William Muldoon wins the Greco-Roman championship from French champion Christol in two straight falls of 10 and 17 minutes. He also wins about $2,000 in side bets. (Geez, if today's wrestlers could find gullible fans to place wagers with, they'd have no financial problems whatsoever.)

February 22, 1903: Tom Jenkins beats Frank Gotch in Cleveland, Ohio, in the first meeting of the dominant American wrestlers of the era. (Cleveland, huh? Well, it could have been worse. The match could have been held inside the confines of a Philadelphia bingo hall.)

February 9, 1937: Billy Wolfe defeats Clara Mortensen via disqualification in a man vs. woman bout in Atlanta. (Innovations such as these matches featuring scrawny wrestlers named Harvey Wippleman and being held in gelatin, turkey gravy, and eggnog wouldn't occur until much later.)

February 22, 1949: Gorgeous George headlines the first Madison Square Garden wrestling card in 12 years, against Ernie Dusek; George pins Dusek in 26:57 in front of 4,197 fans. The New York press isn't impressed by George's theatrics. One *New York Times* sportswriter writes two days later, "Gorgeous George? *Phooey!*" (We're still doing research to find out if the writer's last name was Mushnick.)

February 7, 1963: NWA World champion Lou Thesz defeats Buddy Rogers in a return best-of-three falls match in Toronto. The result has been largely forgotten in wrestling history. (Why we once included the second sentence in our annual *Wrestling Almanac And Book of Facts*, we're not sure. Were we proud of ourselves for unearthing this little historical nugget?)

We Heard That!

"Getting in the ring is something I've always wanted to do. My father and brother forbid me to do that for a while, until I convinced them otherwise. I wanted to see what it felt like to get bounced around. It doesn't feel good, but I can't help loving being in the ring."

—Stephanie McMahon, in an interview with the *Free Lance-Star*

"I don't care about winning, I don't care about losing, I don't care about championships. I just care about putting on the best match I can and having the people entertained because this is show business."

—Chris Jericho, during an interview with the *Winnipeg Sun*

"I loved when I was in WWE doing *WWE Radio*, having a call-in show and haranguing my callers. It's just a really cool gig. There's spontaneity, you have to think on your feet, you don't have to get all dressed up. You can do it in your pajamas if you want."

—Raven, discussing career options once his wrestling career is over, in an interview with the *Pro Wrestling Torch*

"They recognize how we are important to kids nowadays and how we are talked about as much as sports celebrities, as well as the Britney Spears and *NSYNCers as well, so it's kind of cool they're recognizing us within that genre and putting us out there with them."

—Trish Stratus, discussing how entertainment mag-

azines are now interested in doing stories on wrestlers, during an interview on WWE's Internet radio show, *Byte This!*

"Once I started to make a name for myself in ECW, I talked to Shane Helms (The Hurricane), and he said somebody was talking to Arn about a guy in ECW using the Anderson name. Arn's reaction was that I've heard of him, I heard he was a pretty good worker, and I hope he had better success than I did. That was the only feedback I have gotten."

—C.W. Anderson, discussing whether he has ever talked to Arn Anderson about his use of the Anderson name, in an interview with wrestlingobserver.com

October's Best

"Who's this Bo Derek bloke I'm supposed to look like?"

—Robert Payes, stiffshots@stiffshots.com

"If I had to choose between you, Todd Bridges, and Monica Lewinsky to live with on a deserted island for the rest of my life, I'd choose you, Warrior."

—Michael Donato, Bohemia, NY

Davey Boy: "Nice pink shirt, Warrior. You're such a ..." Duggan: *"Hoooooo!"*

—M. Berry, Chicago, IL

Hacksaw: "I like two-by-fours! They're made of wood! *Hoooooo!"* Bulldog: "What did he just say?"

caption me!

Think you're a better writer than the editors at *PWI?* Here's your chance to prove it, punk! This 1996 photo of Rey Misterio Jr. with one of the original *Wizard Of Oz* munchkins needs a short (sorry!), concise, and downright uproarious caption. If you think you're up to the task, e-mail your zany quips to prowrestlingillustrated@yahoo.com, or slap a stamp on an envelope and snail-mail it to "Caption Me!" Box 1148, Fort Washington, PA 19034. Three issues from now, we'll share with you the best of the bunch—and the funnier the better.

Warrior: "Just ignore him. Even I think he's weird."

—Mike McCormack, giveit2u@hotmail.com

Bulldog: "Wow! Hey, Warrior, this cardboard cutout of Duggan looks so real!"

—Jason Bonzano, LuchaMisFit73@aol.com

"Hey, Warrior, are my muscles bigger than Hacksaw's?"

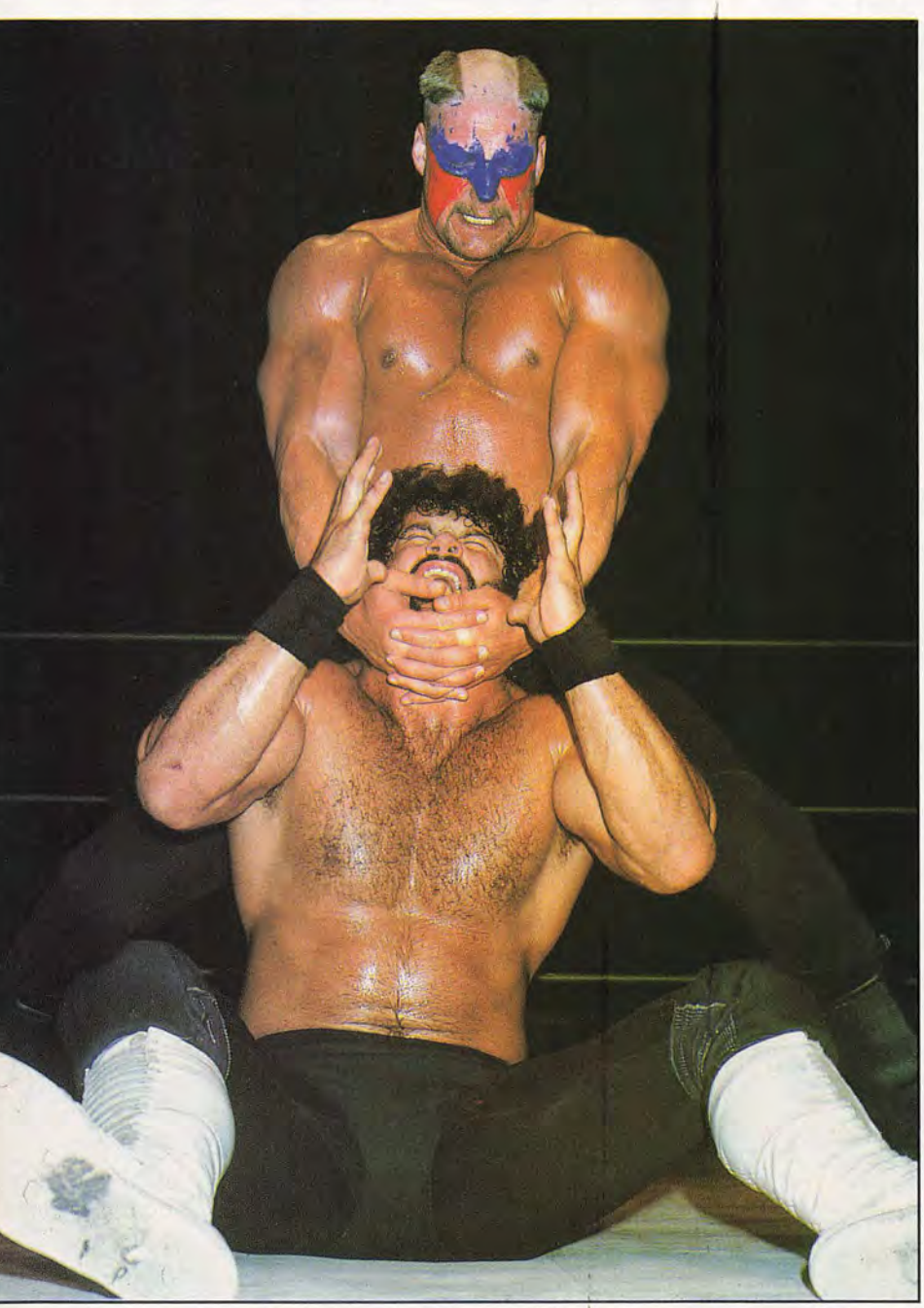
—Matt Mullins, car20@bellsouth.net

Answers to Internet Insider:

Items 1 and 2 are totally made up.

ringside

With Will Welsh



Wrestling was hit hard by tragedy in the early-fall of this year. The most shocking death was that of Road Warrior Hawk, one-half of the tag team many consider the greatest the sport has ever known.

IT'S DEPRESSING ENOUGH to have to report one death in the wrestling industry in this column. In this issue, I regret to inform you that I have three to write about.

The most shocking of the three would have to be that of **Road Warrior Hawk** (real name **Mike Hegstrand**). He was found dead in his bed in the early morning hours of October 19 in Florida, where he had just moved. He was only 46.

Hawk was, as many of you certainly know, one-half (with partner **Animal**) of quite possibly the greatest tag team in history. What fan of wrestling in the mid-1980s could ever forget the way The Road Warriors stormed to the ring wearing their spiked shoulder pads and face paint and just destroyed opposing team after opposing team? No team could come close to matching them in intensity or intimidation.

The Road Warriors began their careers in 1983 and were dominant basically from the start. They were and will always be the only team in history to win the AWA, NWA, and WWF world tag team titles. They defeated **Crusher** and **Baron Von Raschke** for the AWA gold in August 1984, **Bobby Eaton** and **Stan Lane** for the NWA belts in October 1988, and **The Nasty Boys** in August 1991 and **Henry** and **Phineas Godwinn** in October 1997 to capture the WWF team championship.

In addition, Hawk captured two IWGP International tag team titles with **Kensuke Sasaki** while Animal was out of wrestling nursing a serious back injury for several years during the early- to mid-1990s. The Road Warriors were also voted Tag Team of the Year four times between 1983 and 1988 by readers of this magazine, and in a special 20th anniversary issue of *PWI,* published in 1999, we ranked them the number-one tag team of the *PWI* era. They were original inductees in the *Wrestling Observer* Hall of Fame.

In more recent years, the Warriors had been semi-active on the independent circuit and in Japan. They made a brief stop in NWA-TNA late

last year and tried to make one last comeback in WWE this spring. You might remember that they dropped a title match to then-Raw tag team champions **Kane** and **Rob Van Dam** on *Raw* in Philadelphia in May. One night later, they wrestled in a dark match at the *Smackdown* tapings in Baltimore, but they were not offered a contract. About a month later, they celebrated their 20 years as a tag team by reuniting with old manager **"Precious" Paul Ellering** on an independent card.

Although Hawk had experienced some health problems in recent years, his death came as a shock to many in the industry. Cause of death had not been determined as of press time. Everyone at *PWI* would like to send out condolences to Hawk's family, including wife **Dale**, and friends.

Wrestling suffered another great loss on October 16, when **Stu Hart**, patriarch of the world-famous Hart family, died of complications of diabetes and pneumonia at Rockyview General Hospital in Calgary, Alberta. He was 88.

Hart was a legend in the industry. A champion amateur wrestler in his youth, Hart established Calgary-based Stampede Wrestling in 1948. A few decades later, it had become one of the most prestigious of the wrestling territories, featuring stars such as **Junkyard Dog**, **The British Bulldogs**, and Hart's most famous two sons, **Bret** and **Owen**, before they became famous in **Vince McMahon's** rings. Some of today's top wrestlers, including **Chris Jericho**, **Lance Storm**, and **Chris Benoit**, learned their craft while getting stretched by Stu in the Hart family Dungeon, which was featured prominently in the *Wrestling With Shadows* documentary.

In his later years, Stu dealt with numerous family tragedies and other problems, but he always remained proud of the legacy he helped create. Canada was proud of him, too. He was a member of Canada's Wrestling Hall of Fame, and in 2001, he was awarded the Order of Canada, the country's greatest honor for lifetime achievement. He, too, was an original inductee in the *Wrestling Observer* Hall of Fame.

Finally, **Anthony Durante**, better known to wrestling fans as **Pit Bull II**, and his fiancee, **Dianna Hulsey**, were both found dead in their Rhode Island home this fall. Providence's WJAR-TV reported that both had needle marks on their bodies and that the painkiller OxyContin was found on the premises. They were believed to have been dead a few days when their bodies were found by a relative. To make matters even more gruesome, the couple's two children, a 21-month-old and an 8-month-old, apparently spent those few days home alone with the dead bodies; amazingly enough, they were found unharmed. Durante was 36; Hulsey, 29.

Anthony "Pit Bull II" Durante (right) achieved his greatest success with partner Gary "Pit Bull I" Wolfe in ECW in the mid- to late-1990s. Durante and his girlfriend were both found dead in their Rhode Island home this fall.

Durante's biggest claim to fame came during his run with ECW as one-half of **The Pit Bulls**, along with **Gary Wolfe**. Together, Durante and Wolfe captured one ECW tag team championship and helped establish the hardcore style that would eventually become ECW's hallmark. In 1996, Durante defeated **Shane Douglas** for his lone ECW TV title; he would hold the championship for 20 days before losing it to Chris Jericho, but the Douglas-Pit Bull II feud would heat up after Douglas broke Wolfe's neck in the ring.

At the time of his death, Durante was working in a casino in Connecticut but was reportedly preparing to make an in-ring comeback.

I wish we could get to a lot more lighter stuff, but not this month. **Alan Funk**, formerly **Kwee Wee** of WCW and **Miss TNA Bruce** of NWA-TNA, suffered a broken jaw, a broken orbital bone, a broken nose, and a fractured skull during a tag team match in Helsinki, Finland. Funk, who was teaming with **Elix Skipper** against **Sonny Siaki** and **Mike Sanders**, suffered the injury when Siaki went for a split-legged moonsault and missed badly. Siaki's knee slammed hard into Funk's face, causing the injuries and leaving him with an eyeball hanging out of its orbital socket. Funk was told he was lucky to have survived. As of press time, he was still hospitalized in Helsinki, but was ex-

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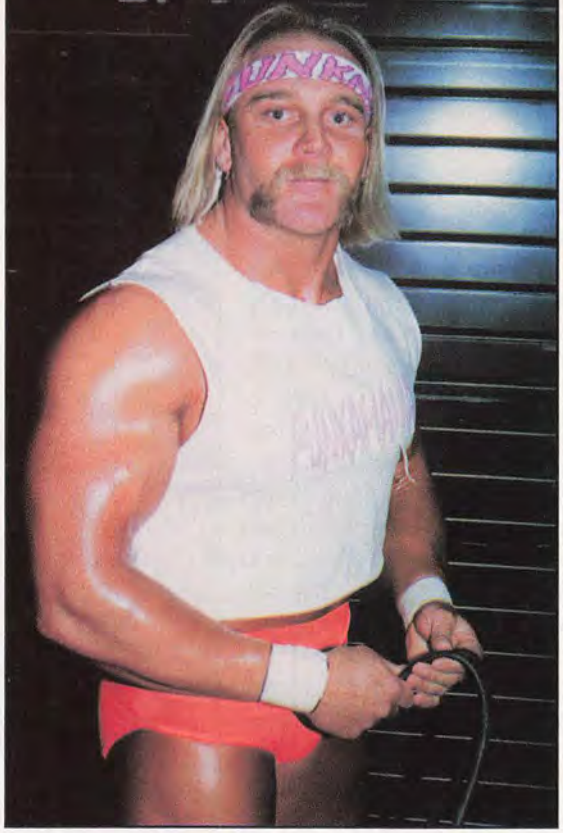

Whether it's as Kwee Wee, Miss TNA Bruce, or even The Funkster (as shown here), Alan Funk is always entertaining. But following a horrific in-ring accident in Finland, it seems unlikely that he'll wrestle again.

pected to be able to fly home sooner rather than later.

In other injury news, **Teddy Long** is minus one "playa." **Rodney Mack** was expected to miss several months of action after injuring his knee during a house show in Norfolk, Virginia. Here's one time we'll "back the Mack" and wish him well.

John Cena, he of the thuganomics, is hoping to deliver his first rap CD shortly after we all ring in the New Year. Cena has been working on the album for months, and at press time, it was reportedly close to completion. However, if you're expecting to go see Cena on a concert tour, put that idea out of your head. Wrestling continues to be his number-one priority, and he isn't expecting to take any time off to promote the album. He'll just have to convince you to buy it by freestyling in the ring as often as possible.

In case you're looking for all the NWA-TNA news, make sure you read the "State Of NWA-TNA" feature on page 38, which stole a couple of stories I had been preparing for this column. In the feature, you'll find updates on ownership's latest move, **Dutch Mantel's** rise to power, and **Hulk Hogan's** new relationship with the group.

That does it for me this month, fans. Enjoy your wanderings. □

Fans of John Cena's rapping skills will be happy to learn that his first CD should be available sometime early in 2004.

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in focus

By Dave Lenker

RANDOM THOUGHTS (MORE OR LESS)

Exposure is a very important word in the entertainment world. You want to expose yourself, so to speak, to the public and get your name out there as best you can. But as you get more famous, you run the risk of overexposure. Basically, you don't want to be Ben and J-Lo. Or, to put it in sports entertainment terms, you don't want to be the McMahons. We know they are, as a whole, overexposed on WWE TV. You know they're overexposed. People inside WWE know they're overexposed. But apparently the McMahons themselves don't care that they're overexposed. Maybe they even think they're *under*exposed.

That one is a given. But there are other people, things, concepts, etc. of which I could stand to see less. And others that leave me begging (well, almost) for more.

Give me less of ... Stephanie's top half. Okay, I can't resist taking a specific shot at a McMahon. I think Triple-H found a very attractive woman to marry, but custom-tailored business suits and formal wear flatter her more than tops that barely contain her upper half. Watching her bounce down to the ring at a recent *Smackdown* taping got me wondering if there are a lot of other high-ranking female executives who flaunt their plentiful cleavage in the workplace the way Steph the general manager does.

If members of the McMahon family are overexposed in general on WWE TV, Stephanie might just be the most overexposed, so to speak, of the overexposed.

Give me more of ... Theodore Long. His stable looks weaker and weaker to me every week, and barring the infusion of new talent with charisma (calling Ernest "The Cat" Miller), it doesn't appear to have much of a future above the *Sunday Night Heat* level. I can't explain why, but when ol' Theo starts dancing for no reason on his way to the ring, it's entertaining, yet when Lita (and, in the past, her good pal Jeff Hardy) does it, it looks like she's having uncontrollable spasms of some sort. He moves well, he speaks well, and he incites others well. What more do you look for in a manager?

Give me less of ... Roddy Piper. NWA-TNA brought him back to the Asylum in Nashville so that he could square off verbally with Vince Russo. I'm not yet through translating what was said on that night from nonsense into English. I think it had something to do with Piper's controversial departure from WWE and perhaps Owen Hart's death. He also stuck around to do a multi-part sitdown (read: taped and, more importantly, edited) interview with Mike Tenay. Sting's one-shot appearance in TNA in June might not have done much for the company in the long run, but at least he was brought in to *wrestle* on the night he was there. Since when are wrestlers brought in by promotions just to do an interview? Thanks for the memories, "Hot Rod," but I hope we've seen the last of you anywhere near a wrestling ring.

Give me more of ... Bret Hart. One of the more interesting stories floating around early this fall

was Kurt Angle respectfully issuing a challenge to the "Hitman" for what could be, if Hart's health weren't an issue, an all-time classic match. Coincidentally, Bret had recently written in his *Calgary Sun* column that he had just dreamed about wrestling for the first time in a long time. He also noted that he would pick Angle for his opponent if he could have one last match, and that he loved the Angle-Brock Lesnar match at WrestleMania XIX. You better believe Vince McMahon would love to have Bret vs. Angle on the marquee outside Madison Square Garden for WM XX. Too bad Bret had to call Angle and tell him thanks but no thanks. Having suffered a stroke in June 2002, he just can't risk taking even one match. Here's hoping that he does agree to appear at 'Mania XX. I'd settle for even one more high-profile appearance from the "Hitman."

Give me less of ... biased executives/matchmakers. In fact, you can get rid of executives who appear on camera altogether, as far as I am concerned. Put together an anonymous championship or executive committee that operates out of a dark room deep in the bowels WWE headquarters. I'm tired of seeing fan favorite Raw GM Steve Austin make matches to irk the heels, while heel GM Eric Bischoff makes matches to punish the fan favorites. Or seeing Bischoff make a match that, once it's been announced, "Stone-Cold" apparently by some obscure co-GM bylaw can't change, though he can add stipulations or a guest referee to it. It's no more frustrating on the Smackdown side, where you essentially have the same power struggle going on between GM Stephanie McMahon and her father. Let's cut down on the non-wrestling talent, please.

Give me more of ... Paul Heyman. In more ways than one. Not only is his creative influence and input missed on the Smackdown side, but he was still one hell of a manager when we last saw him. He's one of the surprisingly few people who commands my attention whenever he steps into the ring with a microphone in hand. When he speaks, he does so because he has something important to say, and he knows to say it plainly, eloquently, and convincingly. I'm dreaming here, but I would like to see what would happen if he were given some real authority in Creative, over both Raw and Smackdown.

Give me less of ... Shane McMahon's entrance music. There's something wrong with a man who has, in just the last few months, tried to kill Kane several times juking to the ring to that bouncy "Here Comes The Money" ditty.

Give me more of ... Lita. Literally. Maybe it's just the new ring outfits, but she's been looking a little too skinny since she returned to action.

Give me less of ... Stacy Keibler abuse. It's horrible when Scott Steiner and Test are the guilty parties, but funny when Steve Austin drops her with a stunner because she doesn't care for beer?

Give me more of ... Victoria doing the abusing. Of her fellow Raw divas, that is. For whatever reason, she got shuffled out of the women's title picture for a few months and relegated to interfering in Steven Richards' *Heat* matches. Good to see her back full-time in all her psychotic splendor. That widow's peak finisher of hers might be the coolest in wrestling right now.

(Have a comment or question about "In Focus" or anything else you see in ***PWI?*** *You can contact Dave Lenker via e-mail at dave_lenker@yahoo.com.)* □

Victoria and Steven Richards have been an interesting couple to watch from the day they hooked up. Dave Lenker is glad, however, that Victoria is back to doing more than running interference for her strange cohort.

off the top rope

By Brandi Mankiewicz

If you wish to contribute to Brandi's mailbag, send your letters to:
TOP ROPE Box 1148 Ft. Washington, PA 19034
Or send e-mail to: **offthetoprope@yahoo.com**

(Editor's note: The opinions expressed in this column are those of the letter writers and Brandi Mankiewicz herself. They do not necessarily reflect the editorial views of this magazine.)

IT'S THAT CHRISTMAS time of the year and I'm feeling generous. I have a wonderful idea for a contest that would be exclusive to "Top Rope" letter-writers. The winner would get a nifty prize package sent to him or her directly from me. Unfortunately, most of your letters come via e-mail, so I don't get a return street address. Otherwise, I would have picked the winner from this very batch of letters.

Therein lies my dilemma: How can I properly hold a contest if I don't have any way to send the prize to the winner? I still want to do this contest—I have the prize sitting on my desk right now, and it's something every wrestling fan would love to own. This one-of-a-kind prize has never been given away by **PWI** *before, and nothing of this magnitude ever will happen again! In other words, in order to qualify for a chance at this great prize, you'll only be required to send a legal street address along with your regular letter to me regardless of the manner you use to send it. I'll announce the winner in the June 2004 issue of* **PWI**.

Why am I being so nice all of a sudden? Because I am your champion, silly.

Hello Brandi!

I was wondering what you thought of the current angles in the WWE featuring abuse of women. In the last few months, we've seen Stacy Keibler being abused by Test, Scott Steiner, and Steve Austin. We have also seen Stephanie McMahon involved in an angle with her father, Vince, where Vince bodyslammed her and put her in matches with A-Train, Big Show, and Brock Lesnar.

I know NWA-TNA has recently toned down violence toward women on its PPVs. I wonder if WWE will do the same. I do understand that all the women involved are over 21. I am just wondering about some young men (teens or younger) watching these angles who might think it's okay to abuse the women in their lives.

I am a long-time fan of all televised wrestling federations (WCW, WWE, etc.) and have always been uncomfortable with the abuse of women. I have mixed feelings about intergender matches, but at least those are supposed to be athletic competitions. I have no mixed feelings about wrestlers beating up their "girlfriends" or valets after losing matches. I think it's wrong and not a part of pro wrestling.

Let me know what you think from the point of view of a woman and a wrestling fan, please.

Sincerely,
WYNN WRIGHT
msfan80@yahoo.com

The relationship between Stacy Keibler and Scott Steiner sure turned ugly in a hurry. I can't say I have as much sympathy for her as so many of you do.

Hello Wynn!

As a woman and a wrestling fan, I believe that women who pick pro wrestling as their trade know what they are getting involved with from the very beginning. It's a male-dominated sport in which chicks have forged a unique spot for themselves. Today's female basically takes the place of the classic manager, only usually with a bigger rack than Jim Cornette or Paul Bearer. Those women who excelled in their wrestling training usually find themselves in competitive matches for women's titles. Those without wrestling ability find themselves used as eye candy and props. What happens to Stacy Keibler is nothing different than what has happened to ringside eye candy in the past. The big difference between Stacy and Fabu-

lous Moolah is that Stacy is making a living with no usefulness in the ring, while Moolah had to fight for every penny in her bank account. Stacy just ought to be grateful that she gets her face on TV and collects a paycheck. As far as young boys getting the wrong impression about how to treat their women, I think wrestling is nowhere near as negative as most hip-hop videos and song lyrics.

Brandi,

Why is it you're always saying the fans find something negative about wrestling, when you take shots at the fledging WWA? Why is the *PWI* staff always attacking defunct federations like ECW, WCW, and the AWA with remarks like, "There will be no 40-year celebrations of WCW or ECW" or "Mad Dog Vachon, The Crusher, Baron Von Raschke, and Buck Zumhoffe won't have the chance to crack the 'AWA 400.'" I find it interesting that your magazine is giving TNA so many good reviews. Isn't this the same company *PWI* stripped of world title status in 1993 in favor of WCW? Why praise TNA when you don't even recognize the prestigious NWA heavyweight title as a world title?

Why don't you all ever shut up about the WWE Intercontinental title. Sure, guys like The Rock, Steve Austin, and Bret Hart got higher up the ladder, but what about The Honky Tonk Man and Razor Ramon? They never had world title reigns. There were many I-C champs who got world title shots in other companies. Curt Hennig and Kerry Von Erich had already been world champions by the time they held the I-C belt. Rick "The Dragon" Steamboat and Shane Douglas were good enough for world title shots. That is why Steamboat beat Ric Flair for the NWA World title. I haven't forgotten about Don "Magnificent" Muraco and Tito Santana. They were able to capture the Eastern (not yet Extreme) Championship Wrestling heavyweight title because they were all great wrestlers, not because of the I-C belt. Clearly the failures outweigh the successes.

DEANGELO KELLOGG
Jim88z@hotmail.com

Deangelo,

There are many can't-miss prospects that fail miserably without ever realizing their full potential. Lex Luger is the first underachiever to come to mind. Past wins don't always mean future success, either. Unfortunately, we do tend to use these past accomplishments to predict the future. In fact, I'll predict the future right now: The WWA deserves negative press because it is going nowhere. It barely exists. It's almost as dead as ECW, WCW, and the AWA. The only annual list WWA will crack is that of defunct companies who once had promise.

The most prominent gift that Gino Hernandez had was the ability to make any opponent look great in the ring. In this photo, he's helping a youngster named Ric Flair become a better wrestler.

Queen Brandi:

You are the only wrestling journalist (or fan, for that matter) who shares with me a great deal of respect and admiration for Gino Hernandez, a tremendous wrestler who never gets the respect he rightfully deserves and tragically died way before his time. My question to you is this: Which do you think was Gino's greatest match? It has always been a hard decision for me, as any moment that he was beating up on a Von Erich qualifies in my book, not to mention his sadistic, yet planned out blinding of Chris Adams.

GARY FUSON
Timeshifter420@aol.com

Dear Gary,

There are too many great Gino Hernandez matches to mention. Any bout in which Gino got the better of a generic Von Erich was good, as was any bout against Ric Flair, but I'm partial to his feud with his mentor, Jose Lothario. Gino and Jose had several classic battles in the late-1970s. Gino got his head shaved in one match and "retired" Lothario by winning a cage match. In the end, Lothario never got the best of his number-one student. Thanks to you, I'm now inspired to go home and hunt down my Gino video collection so I can enjoy at least one match on my TV this week.

Letter of the month (taken verbatim from the actual letter to share my torture with you all):

Dear Brandi,

I had noticed Jeff Hardy missing ring action after Wrestlemania and was wandering what the hell happened to him. I was told that he was having family problems and that both he and Matt had retired. Only that was around the time that Matt had become the Crusierweight Champion. Not until I read the PWI mid-year report magazine, did I discover that the WWE had let him go. I think that really sucks. Where I live, I have a lot of friends who are Jeff Hardy fans. I also read in another magazine that said that he is now wrestling in Ring of Honor. I also have finished reading Matt and Jeff's' book Exist 2 Inspire and I think it is a really great book. But I was wandering if maybe you might be able to get someone from your magazine to do an article on Jeff Hardy. My friends and I would really appreciate it. Thanks.

JOE SOUTH V.1
joev1kingoftheworld@yahoo.com

Dear Joe,

What really sucks isn't that Jeff Hardy is now living the lazy life of a 20-something millionaire, it's that you still care about him. □

krew-cuts

By Frank Krewda

THOSE OF YOU who read *The Wrestler,* one of our sister publications, are familiar with the "Thumbs Up/Thumbs Down" feature that you can find in each issue. Given all the chaos and shenanigans we're seeing on *Raw* and *Smackdown* these days, I figured now would be a good time to conduct a review of what has happened over the past several months. "Thumbs Up/Thumbs Down" provides the perfect format.

THUMBS UP TO THE WWE FOR ...

Taking Stephanie McMahon off *Smackdown* (at least temporarily). By virtue of her "I Quit" loss to her father at No Mercy, viewers are spared her 10-minute staccato interviews, promos, vignettes, etc. for at least a while. I think we could all use the break. Generally speaking, Less Steph + More Wrestling = Better Show. Now Steph's absence could have given WWE Creative a convenient way to wind down this grating general manager stuff, but Vince McMahon chose to name Paul Heyman the new Smackdown GM instead. Now I can only hope Steve Austin will eventually win his freedom to kick ass whenever he sees fit, rather than only when physically provoked, and maybe we will see the dueling GMs concept that has been playing out on the Raw side buried forever.

WWE took a chance by giving Gail Kim the push it did as soon as she made her TV debut. It got mixed results, though Frank Krewda largely likes the contributions she has made to the always-improving women's division.

Unmasking Kane. Though he remained surprisingly popular with the mask, it was clearly time for Kane to undergo a facelift. After years of watching Kane compete under the mask, the mystery surrounding his grotesque appearance had faded. WWE revived interest in Kane when it hinted at his unmasking. So he wasn't as hideous as we thought he'd be. But unmasking "The Big Red Machine" freshened up his character and gave birth to some new storylines. Even though some of them have been too farfetched, it's a lot more interesting to watch Kane now than it was six months ago.

Shoring up the female ranks. In hindsight, it was a little too much too soon for Gail Kim when she won the women's title in her very first appearance on *Raw.* She's a terrific athlete with a lot of charisma, but she still needs a bit more polish. Nevertheless, her fast start seemed to signify a stronger commitment to women's wrestling and a desire to create another true superstar in the female ranks. The Trish Stratus and Lita vs. Molly Holly and Victoria staple can use a few new wrinkles, and I like what Kim has added so far. Just consider how far the women's division has come in the last year.

Promoting the amateur backgrounds of Kurt Angle, Brock Lesnar, Shelton Benjamin, and

Charlie Haas. It's no secret: The less "sport" in sports entertainment, the better for Vince McMahon. It would have been very easy for WWE to completely ignore (or at least de-emphasize) the collegiate (and in the case of Angle, Olympic) accomplishments of these men. Instead, it has wisely promoted their backgrounds and achievements and added lots of color to their feuds. WWE probably never could have pulled off a sensational "Ironman" match between Angle and Lesnar had it not established them as top-notch legitimate athletes.

Killing the J.R vs. Coach feud. Fans lost any way you sliced this one. Ross and Jerry Lawler lost to Coach and Al Snow, which meant we were treated to two weeks of substandard *Raw* play-by-play before Ross and Lawler were reinstated. But win or lose, we had to watch two amateurs (Ross and Coach) slog through some poorly executed matches, not that Ross and Coach could have been expected to give us anything more than lousy matches. Besides, Ross isn't quite the endearing character WWE thinks he is. And Coach's smarmy act got old quickly. Please, let J.R. do what he does best—call the action, nothing more and nothing less.

THUMBS DOWN TO WWE FOR...

Mishandling Bill Goldberg. From the beginning, WWE seemed more intent on destroying the Goldberg hype than promoting it. Jim Ross even admitted Creative overthought the way it handled Goldberg. To its credit, WWE realized the error of its ways and pushed Goldberg to the top ... only to see Batista destroy his ankle and put him out of commission for a while. Not the textbook way to maximize a superstar, but we'll see where this goes from here.

Exploiting Zach Gowen. Sorry, I just don't see the same underdog story most people see when it comes to Gowen. Not when Brock Lesnar and Vince McMahon are whipping a one-legged person about the arena. Just watching Gowen move in the ring is unsettling to me. Unlike most people, I'd rather not watch the "freak show." The tender-hearted among us will say, "But Vince gave this poor soul a chance to live his dream." I'm not so sure of his motivation.

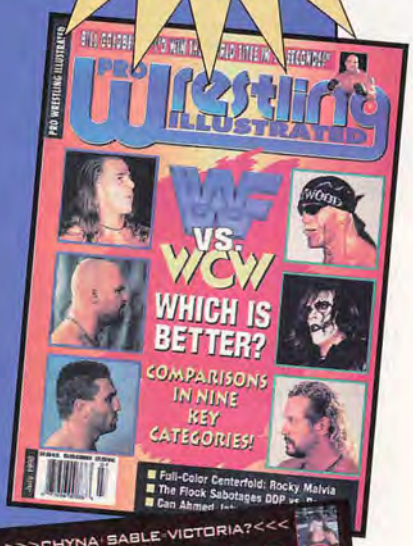
Overprotecting Randy Orton. Is there any reason this third generation star should be camouflaged in a group with Triple-H and Ric Flair? If Orton is any bit the "future of our sport," as J.R. reminds us about 10 times every Monday night, I think he should be out there on his own developing his character and honing his skills. Of course, there's probably something to be said for bringing along the blue-chipper cautiously and surrounding him with talented veterans. But look at how John Cena has progressed after a few years without training wheels.

Lance Storm definitely had the wind knocked out of him by WWE when it was pointed out to everyone that he was boring. He is slowly starting to recover from that, yet there are those who never thought he was dull in the first place.

Overanalyzing Lance Storm. This Calgary native established his wrestling chops long ago, yet he remains saddled with a "gimmick" that affords him little room to demonstrate his ability. He has to show everyone he knows how not to be boring after all. Despite what some people say about his vanilla personality, to me, Storm was far from boring when he wrestled in ECW and WCW. It's a shame these kinds of fans have WWE Creative's ear.

Frustrating Rob Van Dam. I can't help but wonder if Rob Van Dam's frank commentary on WWE—specifically his notion that he has been buried by Creative at times—are biting him in the behind. Yes, he is the Intercontinental champion, but really, what does that title mean to someone who has gotten shot after shot at the Raw title, only to be stymied each time? RVD can't be happy about wrestling in tag team matches low in the card. If I had RVD's ability and connection with the fans, I'd feel as though I were being punished.

Losing The Rock to Hollywood. I guess even Vince McMahon can't change fate. Given his natural charisma, it should be no surprise The Rock has ended up in Hollywood. What could McMahon have done differently? Nothing. If anything, he should get some credit for handling Rock's career so well that Hollywood soon noticed him. Now we'll be lucky if we see him in a wrestling ring once a year. □



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May 2000: The Y2K *PWI* Poll. Plus: Mitsuharu Misawa, Triple-H, Bret Hart, Hollys, Chyna & Aysa, ECW returnees.

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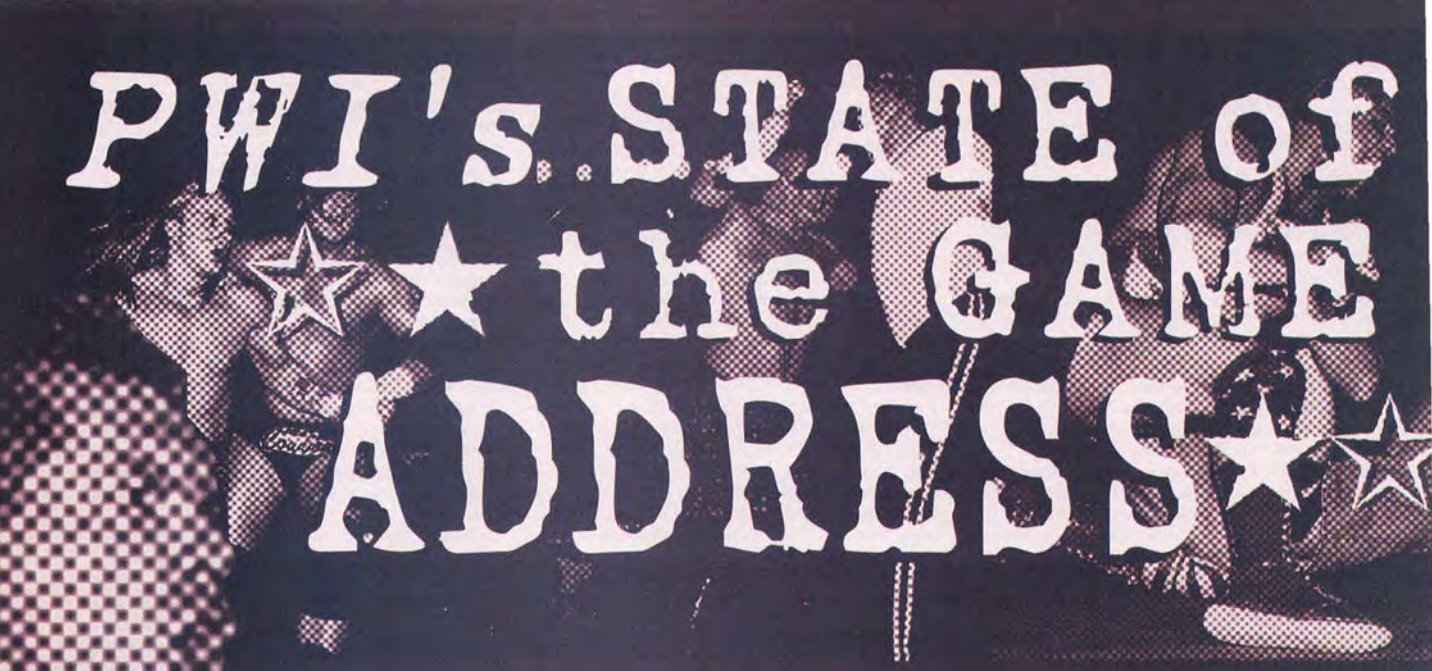


WE CONCLUDED LAST year's "State Of The Game Address" with a cliffhanger regarding 2003: "Will there still be Raw and Smackdown brands, or TNA? We don't know." One year later, we know the answer to that question is a resounding yes. And that's very good news for the industry.

Why is it such good news? By the end of 2002, we were fearful that WWE—caving to ratings pressure and desperate to hot shot its programs—would end the brand extension experiment, and that Raw and Smackdown would unify into one roster. To our surprise, WWE has not only retained the brand extension, but also gone to great pains to keep Raw and Smackdown separate by maintaining two champions, keeping talent swaps to a minimum, and implementing brand-exclusive pay-per-views.

Fans were slow to warm up to the brand extension at first, and there are still problems, yet it is clear that separate rosters have given viewers more compelling reasons to watch both *Raw* and *Smackdown* each week. The ratings for both shows have displayed slight improvement since early-2003. (Now if only house show attendance would follow suit!) Having two leagues within WWE might be a permanent and effective way of doing business. Or the McMahons might be keeping open the possibility of reuniting the Raw and Smackdown rosters at some point, or at least recognizing a unified World champion again. In that case, they might be waiting for just the right moment—perhaps when the economy improves and the next wrestling boom seems imminent.

Finally, Raw and Smackdown are showing signs of offering distinct products, rather than just being one with red ropes and the other with blue ropes. Raw has emphasized over-the-top storylines, such as the Kane-Shane McMahon feud, and has more familiar faces, with Bill Goldberg, Steve Austin, Eric Bischoff, Shawn Michaels, Scott Steiner, and other veterans being staples of the program. Our "State Of Raw" feature analyzes WWE's mishandling of Goldberg, why Triple-H has failed to help rising stars break through, and why so many potential main-eventers are stuck on the mid-card.

In the "State Of Smackdown," we commend that brand for emphasizing athleticism over backstage silliness, at least most of the time. Brock Lesnar, Kurt Angle, Eddie Guerrero, Chris Benoit, and Rey Misterio Jr. have consistently delivered four-star matches. Smackdown received considerable praise for the Lesnar-Angle "Ironman" match on free television and for its brand-exclusive PPVs, including Vengeance and No Mercy.

For those craving an alternative from WWE, NWA-TNA has impressed the wrestling world with its mere survival. Wednesdays have become important wrestling nights in many households, and—after a shaky start—TNA's weekly PPVs are consistently receiving positive reviews. In the "State Of NWA-TNA," we explain how the tentative debut of Hulk Hogan and a three-hour Sunday night pay-per-view in early-2004 could be the turning point that makes the promotion a major league challenger to WWE and helps it gain a national TV contract. TNA's X division has elevated several young stars, including Michael Shane, Chris Sabin, and Frankie Kazarian. The X division's first champion, A.J. Styles, added prestige to the NWA heavyweight title with a respectable reign in 2003.

The indy circuit is percolating as well, as discussed in our "State Of Independent Wrestling." Ring of Honor has become the number-one independent in the United States, and has launched several wrestlers—including Spanky and Paul London—into the big time. The East Coast Wrestling Association, which might have to some extent inspired Ring of Honor's sportsmanship ethic with its annual Super 8 Tournament, continues to run solid shows in Delaware. Combat Zone Wrestling and IWA Mid-South are among the promotions still tapping into the hardcore market.

In the "State Of International Wrestling," we report that some promotions around the world are thriving, but not the ones you might expect. All-Japan and New Japan continue to struggle, while smaller promotions such as Michinoku Pro and Toryumon are exceeding their own expectations. The long-dormant European scene is showing signs of life, most notably in the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, France, and Finland. Australia regularly hosts WWE and could do the same for NWA-TNA in the future.

Yet those aren't the only aspects of pro wrestling that we examine. "State Of The Stars" evaluates the careers of the industry's most prominent players, "State Of The Art" analyzes the sport's ever-evolving style, and "State Of The Business" examines the overall health of wrestling with cold, hard numbers. And how will the business be faring at this time in 2004? You'll have to read "State Of The Future" to get our view on where the current trends are headed. So keep an open mind and see whether you agree with our insights ... and our take on the current "State Of The Game."

☆★STATE of RAW★☆

Last year in this very space, we lamented the fact that Raw seemed to be lagging behind Smackdown in the early stages of the WWE brand extension. Twelve chaotic months later, we must report that we have similar concerns, though there is cause to be optimistic

FOR THE LONGEST time, the fate of Raw rested within the hands of one man. Surprisingly enough, that man wasn't WWE Chairman Vince McMahon. It wasn't within the hands of either of the brand's co-general managers, "Stone-Cold" Steve Austin or Eric Bischoff, either. No, the fate of the Raw brand rested squarely within the large, sledgehammer-wielding mitts of Triple-H.

Helmsley, who dominated the Raw championship scene from the night of September 2, 2002, when Bischoff awarded him the title (save for when Shawn Michaels borrowed the gold for a few weeks in November and December 2002), until the night of September 21, 2003, when he lost it cleanly to Bill Goldberg, was by far the brand's most dominating presence over the past year. He plowed through every opponent who stood in his path and threw his weight around the backstage area as often as he could. Those who stood with him, such as his partners in Evolution, Ric Flair and Randy Orton, benefited from their relationship with him. Those who opposed him, which was pretty much everyone else, didn't actually oppose him. They stood to the side and let the Helmsley Express rumble its way through the year virtually unscathed.

As it turns out, this wasn't exactly a good thing. Helmsley dominated Raw's roster completely, so much so that his opponents never

Bill Goldberg, as WWE Raw champion, is getting a chance to do a lot to turn around what is, quite frankly, a struggling brand. But can he succeed at the same time Raw tries to elevate deserving young talent?

seemed like they had a chance to win the Raw championship. Rob Van Dam, Chris Jericho, Booker T, Kane ... they all fell to the wayside; they all succumbed to Helmsley, and in their wake they left a black ocean of nothingness. And people took note. Without anyone left to challenge Helmsley, the championship was devalued. What good is a champion or a championship without viable challengers?

Of course, as all this played out, there was one challenger waiting, biding his time to assume his role as Helmsley's arch-nemesis. He had wanted to face "The Game" for years, but politics and contractual obligations had kept the feud on hold. And when Bill Goldberg finally debuted for WWE, he was immediately thrust into a feud with The Rock, a feud he could not really win, no matter how many victories he piled up against "The Great One." The Rock, at his entertaining best, outmaneuvered Goldberg in every way possible, often leaving "Da Man" looking like "Da Fool," but even worse, making him look like a rank amateur. By the time their short feud was over, Goldberg had garnered a decisive win over The Rock, but he had lost many of his fans in the process. They wanted to see the Goldberg of old, and this watered-down WWE version was anything but.

Triple-H dispatched Booker T and a handful of other potential main eventers during his year of dominance over the Raw brand. Although he probably gets too much blame, it was a year in which he was too dominant for the good of Raw.

In the end, it didn't matter that Goldberg's WWE career started slowly and awkwardly. WWE had paid him big money, and once he had gotten past The Rock, the company expected bigger, more lucrative things out of him—whether Raw fans were ready to get behind him or not. Goldberg was going to have to be the man to dethrone Triple-H, even if he got booed in the process, because that's the hole that WWE officials had dug for themselves.

Fortunately for Goldberg and WWE, he wasn't booed when he finally beat Helmsley for the title at the Unforgiven pay-per-view. Raw fans, having seen him slowly adjust to WWE's pacing and style, began to believe in him again, and although he wasn't the same Goldberg who beat Hulk Hogan for the WCW championship before a frenzied crowd of more than 40,000 at the Georgia Dome in 1998, he still carried a bit of that old mystique with him. The luster hadn't rubbed off entirely.

Injuries slowed Randy Orton during the early part of his WWE career. Now that he is healthy, he looks like one of the few young Raw stars destined to climb to the top of the card.

This is a good thing, because Raw needs luster desperately—especially with Helmsley taking time off while attempting to become the next WWE superstar to make it in Hollywood. Goldberg's presence on the Raw roster, while definitely not a fix-all, helps immensely. Remember, there was a time when Goldberg was *the* hottest wrestler on the planet—yes, hotter than The Rock, and hotter than "Stone-Cold" Steve Austin. And because Goldberg has been at the top of the sport, it's not so hard to imagine that he could get there again.

Now if only the company would consistently use him right.

See, Raw is desperate for star power.

STATE of RAW

Goldberg, Triple-H, and Jericho are the only proven full-time main event wrestlers—and we're not even sure Jericho fits that category anymore. The other two stars of the show, "Stone-Cold" Steve Austin and Eric Bischoff, aren't wrestlers. The rest of the crew are solid mid-carders (even former main-eventers like Scott Steiner and Shawn Michaels), and it doesn't look like any of them is ready to step up and assume a place in the top tier in the immediate future. To make matters worse, there's also only one way for these mid-carders to make the jump to the top tier: by going through Raw's current crop.

As unfortunate as it is, the only way these mid-carders are going to be turned into full-fledged main-eventers is if Goldberg, Triple-H, and Jericho do their best to establish them as such.

So far, the only wrestler of those three who seems willing to help build up younger wrestlers is Jericho, possibly because he fought so hard for so long to make it to the top that he now wants to help other deserving wrestlers make it there. Helmsley is too darn focused on becoming this generation's Ric Flair to let anyone he considers unworthy to step over him—even for a night. As for Goldberg, he hasn't had too many chances to help create new stars, and we don't expect that he'll have too many, either. His character is based on sheer domination and decisive two-minute wins. He can't afford to look weak against Lance Storm, Rob Van Dam, or even against Raw's resident monster, Kane. In order to be effective, he needs to plow through these possible top tier performers almost effortlessly, which may help his career a little, but could do irreparable damage to those wrestlers upon whom Raw is going to have to depend in the future.

Of course, none of this is Goldberg's fault. He was given this character by WCW way back in 1997, and it served him well. In fact, it served him a bit too well, because Goldberg can't survive a huge setback, let alone a series of them. Once Goldberg shows an ounce of weakness, once he loses a big match or fails to come through in the clutch, the fans immediately stop believing in him and chanting his name. It happened in WCW after Kevin Nash beat him with the help of Scott Hall's electric cattle prod, and it happened in WWE when the fans chanted for The Rock instead of him during their feud.

When the fans sense weakness in Goldberg, they jump on him almost immediately.

And so a Goldberg domination storyline is very much a Catch-22. In order for Goldberg to be an effective champion, he has to gain lopsided wins against the best and brightest Raw has to offer—a chain of events that strengthens Goldberg's character yet undeniably weakens Raw's future.

The whole scenario surrounding Goldberg's title reign wasn't thought out all that well, either. What about the bounty that Triple-H has placed on Goldberg's head? It added intrigue to the feud between the two men, but soon after he made the announcement, it became apparent that Raw's wrestlers weren't going after Goldberg because he had the Raw championship, but rather because they wanted Helmsley's $100,000.

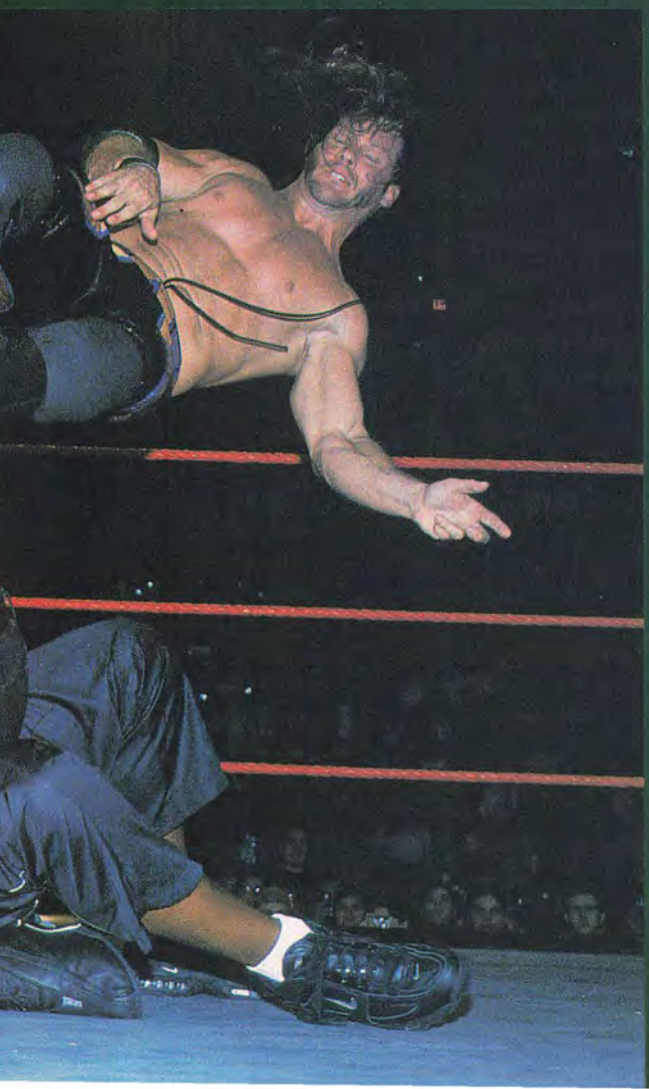
Talk about a way to devalue a championship!

A good example of the ridiculousness of which we see too much on *Raw* every week: the Jim Ross-Jonathan Coachman feud. What did it really accomplish?

Of course, the bounty situation is just one example of WWE Creative getting ahead of itself and hurting Raw's hopes of rebounding from its current doldrums by creating storylines that are lacking in the logic department. How badly has Kane been hurt by the handling of his character? We agree that he needed to be unmasked, but we never thought that the storyline would take the crazy path that it's taken. Thanks in great part to the ridiculous situations in which he has found himself in recent months (such as being accused of murder and necrophilia), it's been hard for him to get people to forget what a joke he became for a while and take him seriously as a monster.

And what was up with that whole Jonathan Coachman-Jim Ross feud that, quite honestly, went nowhere? While we admit that we appreciate Coachman's antics more than most (the guy has a genuine flair for over-the-top ridiculousness), we don't understand any rivalry that removes Jim Ross from the announcer's desk. He's the greatest announcer of his generation, and the emotion he brings to the sport adds such character and credibility to a show that it cannot be overvalued. Every show that features an announcer other than Ross calling Raw matches is a show that automatically starts out fighting a negative review. How that can be a good thing, we're not sure.

We can't argue that Kane is not one of the more interesting characters on the Raw roster in late-2003. Yet the road he has traveled during the last year has been a windy, treacherous one.



Raw is hardly without hope, though. There are some shiny stars capable of becoming main event players—if their careers are handled properly. And the person at the top of this list is none other than Triple-H's partner-in-crime, Randy Orton.

Looking closely at Orton, it's obvious that he has what it takes to make it big in the sport. First of all, he's a natural in the ring. There's no doubt the fact that he is a third-generation wrestler has benefited him greatly. He also looks like he's cut from granite, and he's already mastered the art of the promo. His cocky personality is such that if it's tweaked a little to the right, he could become a fan favorite, yet if it's kept dialed in exactly where it is right now, he's a perfect heel. And when he's a heel, he's not a heel for whom you want to cheer, either. You just want to watch him get his butt kicked, and then you want to watch him get it kicked again.

Maven's also a candidate for a top tier slot. Although he still has some of the stink of *Tough Enough* left on his clothes, he's shown that he's more than capable of handling himself in the ring

☆★STATE of RAW★☆

and on the microphone with WWE's top stars. Given a little bit more coaching and just the right amount of development, Maven could be main-eventing a year from now, maybe sooner.

As for the rest of the Raw roster, there aren't any other surefire main-eventers in the bunch. If RVD hasn't made it yet, he won't. Christian is a bit too small to ever join the top tier. Lance Storm is too boring ("Stone-Cold" Steve Austin's words, not ours). Mark Jindrak, Garrison Cade, and Test are too vanilla. Scott Steiner is too broken down.

Compare Raw's roster to Smackdown's, which is pretty loaded, and you'd swear that Raw played in a league governed by a salary cap, while Smackdown was able to wheel and deal for virtually any wrestler it wanted. The disparity is significant.

Now, this might read like we're disparaging the Raw roster. We don't mean to, because, in all honesty, the roster is pretty darn deep. It's just short on main-eventers, which is why Maven and Orton need to develop quickly. If you want to go back in history and compare Raw's current mid-card roster against WWE's mid-card roster of years past, we're sure that you'd give the edge to Raw's current mid-carders 95 percent of the time.

Unfortunately, the reason for this is that Raw's mid-card roster is filled with wrestlers whose careers were mismanaged so badly that they ended up being mid-carders instead of the main-eventers they could and should have been.

WWE will probably never fully appreciate what it has in Chris Jericho (shown debating Kevin Nash in a "Highlight Reel" segment). He's one of Raw's hotter stars, but he could be so much hotter.

We don't mean to pick on Raw (though that does seem like what we've been doing so far), so we're going to change gears. After all, Raw delivers more than thorns and poison ivy. Cut through the weeds, and you'll find some roses rising up out of the ground.

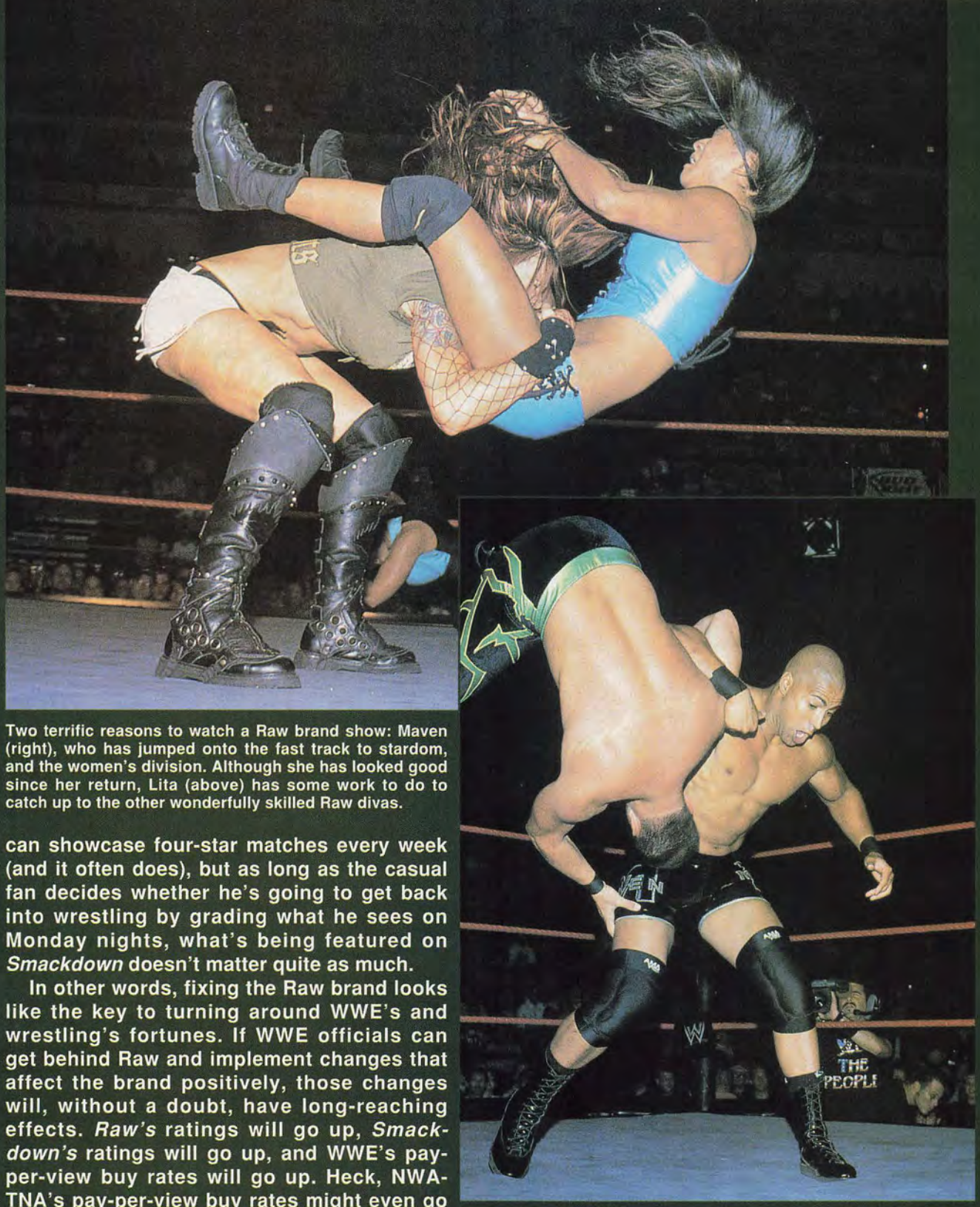
Take, for instance, Raw's women's division. We dare say that WWE has never featured a women's division so laced with talent from top to bottom (and, no, we're not talking about the types of tops and bottoms Jerry "The King" Lawler likes to shoot off at the mouth about). Trish Stratus, Victoria, Molly Holly, Gail Kim, Jazz, and Lita are some of the finest women wrestlers this sport has seen in the last quarter-century, and their dedication to the sport has paid off in the desire of fans to see more of their matches. Not just their scantily clad bodies, but their *matches.*

We're not talking about gimmick matches, either. If the women want to celebrate Thanksgiving by having a battle royal in a giant pool of gravy, we're not going to stop them, but we also have no problem settling in for a good old-fashioned one-on-one between the women. Their matches are athletic, well-wrestled, and entertaining, and these divas should be congratulated on changing the perception of women's wrestling to what it should be.

Yes, the days when women's matches were best utilized as bathroom breaks are long gone.

And while you might or might not believe this, Raw also has one other edge over its sister brand. No matter how you cut it, Monday night is still wrestling night. This may have lessened a little bit since *WCW Monday Nitro* went off the air, but it's still true. Ask a casual wrestling fan what night wrestling is on, and his first reply will likely be Monday.

This fact is more important that you might realize, because if Monday night is wrestling night, it's *Raw* that has more control over the habits of wrestling's viewing public. *Smackdown*



Two terrific reasons to watch a Raw brand show: Maven (right), who has jumped onto the fast track to stardom, and the women's division. Although she has looked good since her return, Lita (above) has some work to do to catch up to the other wonderfully skilled Raw divas.

can showcase four-star matches every week (and it often does), but as long as the casual fan decides whether he's going to get back into wrestling by grading what he sees on Monday nights, what's being featured on *Smackdown* doesn't matter quite as much.

In other words, fixing the Raw brand looks like the key to turning around WWE's and wrestling's fortunes. If WWE officials can get behind Raw and implement changes that affect the brand positively, those changes will, without a doubt, have long-reaching effects. *Raw's* ratings will go up, *Smackdown's* ratings will go up, and WWE's pay-per-view buy rates will go up. Heck, NWA-TNA's pay-per-view buy rates might even go up, and NWA-TNA officials could find a successful partner with which to take their promotion to regular cable television—possibly for a head-to-head battle with *Raw.*

And all because Monday night is still wrestling night.

The bottom line is the state of Raw isn't as bad as many people seem to think, but it's also not great. We must all hope Vince McMahon and Creative will realize that while Smackdown has been the better of the two brands of late, Raw remains its flagship brand. A little smart tweaking, a little positive character development, and Raw can lead wrestling back to the top of the entertainment heap. Just give it time—and plenty of patience. □

STATE of SMACKDOWN

Photos by Gary Dineen/Winning Image

It's the WWE brand that has all the talent and then some to thrive, yet, like Raw, it has struggled at times recently. Great athletes in great matches ought to equal great success, but it hasn't been that easy

ALL THINGS CONSIDERED, Smackdown is the better of the two WWE brands. It features consistently better wrestling than Raw. Unlike cable-TV-dependent Raw, it gets its flagship show broadcast to the masses over network television. And it features the best feud WWE has going today, Brock Lesnar vs. Kurt Angle; Raw doesn't have one feud that's quite as entertaining. And on top of all that, Smackdown is the brand with which the McMahon family is more directly involved.

Unfortunately, none of that really means as much as it should, because Smackdown is experiencing some of the same doldrums that have plagued Raw of late. Once the pride of UPN, *Smackdown* now has to compete with other programs on the network, such as *7th Heaven* and *Everwood*, for the week's ratings prize. It's no longer guaranteed to be the network's number-one program, and ratings have slipped to such a degree that it's becoming a battle for UPN to finish even fourth among all network programming on Thursday nights. Facing stiff competition from NBC's "must-see-TV" lineup, *Survivor* on CBS, and *Threat Matrix* on ABC, plus shows such as *The Jamie Kennedy Experiment* and *Steve Harvey's Big Time* on the WB, *Smackdown* must showcase compelling matches and superior storylines week in and week out to maintain its viewership, and that's harder to do than most people realize.

How did this happen? How did Smackdown, the WWE brand that consistently gets heralded as far and away the better of the two WWE brands, end up in such a position? Well, it's pretty simple, really. Just look at the first paragraph in this story. All those positives can be counterbalanced by just as powerful negatives.

Smackdown has become, even more so than Raw, the McMahon brand. Vince vs. Steph was the family feud of the fall this year, but it seems a lot of fans have had enough of the McMahons for the time being.

BETTER WRESTLING

Yes, Smackdown does feature better wrestling than Raw. We've known this for quite some time, and as long as the roster remains mostly intact, it's probably going to remain that way for the foreseeable future.

WWE fans, though, don't just want better wrestling; they want better feuds, more drama and intrigue—or at least that's what WWE seems to believe. That's why, in case you haven't noticed, Smackdown has quietly moved away from featuring longer wrestling matches and moved toward more personality-driven feuds—hence Eddie Guerrero's feud with The Big Show being based on laxative-laden burritos and raw sewage, and Vince McMahon's feud with his daughter, Stephanie, getting more play than nearly any other fall storyline.

Fortunately for Smackdown, its roster is chock full of wrestlers who are capable of pulling off such things. We've already addressed Guerrero briefly, but Kurt Angle, John Cena, Matt Hardy, Jamie Noble, Nidia, and Sable are good characters around which to base outrageous storylines; it's just going to take some time for these guys to get accustomed to this somewhat new approach.

The easy (and maybe smart!) thing for Smackdown Creative to do would be to just showcase great matches between great athletes like Matt Hardy and Eddie Guerrero (below) every week. Instead, the sports *entertainment* quotient is being turned up. Remember Big Show's bout with bad burritos (right)?

NETWORK TELEVISION

Remember when Smackdown first hit the airwaves? Boy, was WWE proud. The company put the full force of its hype machine behind the show, making sure that everyone and his brother knew that it was the first regularly broadcast wrestling program on network TV since the old *Saturday Night's Main Event*. And you were proud, too. You could finally tell family and friends what channel a wrestling show was on without having to wait for the eventual, "And what number is that channel on the cable box?"

Now, though, because of Smackdown's reliance on storyline-driven episodic television, the fact that it's on broadcast TV might be a hindrance. Look at all the things that Raw gets away with—and without Spike TV censors hitting the mute button in every other segment. Raw wrestlers and officials can use all sorts of colorful words without having to worry about their meaning getting obscured or lost in translation thanks to the censors. Smackdown wrestlers aren't so lucky. How many times has John Cena been censored on *Smackdown*? He probably stopped counting, and that has to be frustrating for him.

If he were a Raw wrestler, there's only one instance in which Spike TV censors might have taken offense (when he made an ill-timed joke about John Ritter), and the offending rap might have gotten through anyway because Spike TV doesn't man the censor button as devotedly as UPN does—and *Raw* airs live, after all.

Smackdown is also the WWE brand that has to put up the good fight against groups such as the Parents Television Council. While the PTC hasn't come after Smackdown in a while, can you imagine the uproar that would have started had the Triple-H-Kane-Katie Vick debacle been featured on UPN? It would have been so ugly that there would have been calls for *Smackdown* to be

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removed from the public airwaves. But because the feud was featured on cable, Spike TV was able to get away with only issuing a statement that said it took issue with such content. The only people who were offended were wrestling fans, as crazy as that sounds.

Oh, how Smackdown would like to have Raw's relative freedom. If Smackdown is jealous of Raw of anything, that's it.

BROCK LESNAR vs. KURT ANGLE

Brock Lesnar vs. Kurt Angle is, without a doubt, the best feud going in WWE—heck, the entire sport—today. Thanks to their backgrounds in amateur wrestling, the two men have history to work with and serious mat skills to back everything up. Every time they lock up, they attempt to outdo their last match and take the audience to another level. They want to make each and every one of their matches memorable.

This is all well and good, but it's not perfect, because Lesnar and Angle have been feuding for a while now, going back to long before WrestleMania XIX. They've faced each other dozens of times and in many gimmick matches; they've even gone toe-to-toe in a 60-minute "Ironman" challenge (that Lesnar won for the Smackdown championship) on free TV. Perhaps the only thing these two haven't done is fought in a "Hell In A Cell" match, went to war inside Raw's "Elimination Chamber," or faced off in a ladder match. Luckily for us, common sense tells us that if Angle and Lesnar did compete in these matches, we'd walk away from the arena or turn away from the TV disappointed.

It's true, all Angle and Lesnar need to have a five-star match is a ring—and we're not even sure they need that. A back alley would probably do nicely, too.

The thing that has us worried is this: What does Smackdown have to offer in place of Angle vs. Lesnar? Looking around, we have to say not much to the casual viewer, which might be a reason why Vince McMahon vs. Stephanie McMahon received such high billing in the weeks leading toward the No Mercy pay-per-view.

This criticism is not meant to demean the rest of Smackdown's roster—especially its top tier. However, we've seen Angle vs. Undertaker and Lesnar vs. Undertaker before. We've also seen Angle vs. Big Show and Lesnar vs. Big Show. (We've even seen all three men compete against one another a triple threat match!) Heck, we've even seen Vince vs. Stephanie in a few different forms before. Not even that match was genuinely new!

Entering No Mercy, the one match that we were looking the most forward to was Angle vs. Cena; not only do they play off each other well, it was one of the only matches on the card that didn't seem tired. Everything else seemed like a rerun or not all that special. *That*

WWE seems to realize that everyone needs a break from the spectacular Brock Lesnar-Kurt Angle feud (below). Angle, for one, has moved on to a fresh feud with John Cena (left). Let's hope Lesnar follows suit soon.

If McMania would stop running wild on Smackdown shows, there would me more chances for deserving talent like Charlie Haas and Chris Benoit to squeeze into main events.

tells us it's time for Smackdown Creative to try some new things, to take a few chances.

Put some faith in Cena and Guerrero and Matt Hardy in very prominent roles. Don't worry if they don't draw huge ratings or pay-per-view buy rates right away. Sacrifice short-term gains for potential long-term payoffs. Smackdown has plenty of talent that's ready and waiting to step up. And if they're given a chance to establish themselves at the top of the card, Angle, Lesnar, Show, and Undertaker will in turn seem fresher as well. But that brings us to a big problem ...

THE McMAHONS

Let's begin by acknowledging that Smackdown doesn't have the market cornered on McMahons. Vince and Linda make occasional appearances on *Raw*, and Shane McMahon has been entrenched in an ugly feud with Kane for what seems like months. The McMahons will never let Raw go without their presence for long, because no matter what else happens, it remains their flagship brand. If everything else fails and WWE starts crumbling, the McMahons will circle the wagons around Raw to make sure it survives.

At this point, WWE simply wouldn't be WWE without Raw emanating live every week from somewhere in North America.

Smackdown, though, is currently the home to most of the McMahon family—sans Shane, of course. In fact, it's a regular McMahon family variety show. Vince and Stephanie dominate the programming, and Linda even got herself involved enough to put herself in Stephanie's corner for her "I Quit" match against Vince at No Mercy.

Simpy put, the match between Vince and Stephanie should have never happened. The McMahons seem to be convinced that they're the key to keeping Smackdown strong, so common sense was thrown out the door and the match was booked.

Every wrestling promotion needs its ownership to have a hand in how it's run and, used properly, ownership can be effective in on-air roles. Ownership, though, shouldn't forget that the wrestlers need to come first and their own on-air ambitions a distant second. Right now with Smackdown, that's not the way things are being played out. McMahon family dominance is hurting the overall product, and they're the only people who don't seem to realize this.

WHAT IT ALL MEANS

By now, you're probably trying to figure out how WWE's best brand could be in such dire straits. You're wondering how *PWI* can be so negative, seemingly so down on a brand that features the most well-rounded and athletically talented roster in the history of the sport.

Let us say this: We're not actually down on it—we're just being realistic. Despite all the talent on its roster, Smackdown is a brand that's underachieving. Its ratings have slowly slipped, despite what we perceive to be good, quality programming. In fact, if you take the current Smackdown programming and compare it against wrestling programming of past generations, we think that you'll find that it holds up better than most. It might be the best wrestling show in the history of the sport.

Smackdown's numbers may not be blowing people away, but it is not going to go away anytime soon. Just like the rest of corporate America, however, WWE officials are always looking for ways to make the company even more money. That's why they're constantly tweaking the formula, looking for just the right

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amount of wrestling and sports entertainment to get things clicking like they were a few years ago.

While we're not offering any specific ideas to try to help speed up this process, we do have a few things to point out. Most importantly, WWE needs to realize that Smackdown has so much potential as a brand. Its roster doesn't appear to have many flaws at all, not on top, not in the middle, and not at the bottom. Some of its stars, such as Lesnar, Angle, The Undertaker, The Big Show, and Vince McMahon, rank among the sport's top stars, with only Raw's Triple-H, Bill Goldberg, Chris Jericho, and "Stone-Cold" Steve Austin joining them at the very top.

Smackdown's next tier of stars, including Eddie Guerrero, Cena, Matt Hardy, Chris Benoit, and Rey Misterio Jr. aren't far behind. They're more than capable of delivering strong main event matches when asked to (we wish they would be asked to do so much more often!), and all of them are underrated when it comes to their ability to carry a high-profile storyline. Cena seems to be the closest to joining the top tier on a full-time basis, but all of them are difference-makers. There's not a guy in that bunch who isn't worthy of consideration for a main event slot.

Of course, you also have Smackdown's brand of mid-carders, led by A-Train and dependent upon a group of other young up-and-comers who should make decent impacts in the years to come. Take, for instance, Chuck Palumbo and Sean O'Haire. While neither is ready for the top tier right now, both have come a long way since their days as a tag team in WCW, and both show some main event potential. Four or five years from now, they might be at the top of Smackdown's roster. Other promising mid-carders include Rhyno, Shelton Benjamin, Charlie Haas, and The Basham Brothers. Would you bet against these guys succeeding in the future? We know we wouldn't.

Then there's WWE's cruiserweight division, which seemingly gets a new addition every few months. How good is it? Well, when Ultimo Dragon is part of the roster and eligible to compete for the cruiserweight title yet is unable to find TV time most weeks, you know how good it is. Hardy did wonders for the title when he held it by making it seem important to others than just cruiserweights, and subsequent feuds over the belt have illustrated

The cruiserweight division's push as a whole has been hot and cold, and that's unfortunate. Tajiri, the champ at press time, and Kidman are just two of the many outstanding athletes in those ranks.

WWE's dedication to the division. Now if we could only stop Creative from putting some of the best cruiserweights in ridiculous mismatches against super heavyweights such as Lesnar, Big Show, and A-Train, we'd truly be happy.

As of press time, Tajiri was the champion, but Misterio, Billy Kidman, Nunzio, Spanky, and newcomer Paul London were all in the hunt for the championship. Even "Smackdown number-one announcer" Funaki takes a crack at the belt on occasion.

If you want to look at the women, well, Smackdown might not feature a women's division like Raw does, but that doesn't mean that its roster of women isn't ultra-competitive. Right now, Sable (who continues to defy age *and* gravity) gets the most TV time of any female thanks to her relationship with Vince McMahon, but Torrie Wilson, Nidia, and Dawn Marie are constantly looking for ways to make an impact. And Shaniqua is downright scary!

Don't mistake these women for couch potatoes just because they're not wrestling every week.

It's funny, in last year's "State Of The Game" edition, we wrote, "Right now, Smackdown has it over Raw. A year from now, things might be different. Raw could be the brand that's on the roll, and Smackdown could be struggling to find its identity." Who knew what we'd come so close to the truth with those last few words?

When looking at Smackdown, yes, it's obvious that it has its problems, but it's also obvious that it has the tools to overcome its problems if those tools are used correctly. If it shows some patience and guts, settles on an identity, cuts down on the McMahon influence, and continues to produce quality programming, we don't see why it can't start back on the upswing. We have to believe this, because at its best, Smackdown is as good as wrestling gets these days, so if it doesn't do well, it's not a good sign for the rest of the industry. □

The Basham Brothers (checking on manager Shaniqua, below) and Jamie Noble (battling Shannon Moore, left) wrestle mostly on the lower end of the mid-card, and they're darn good in the ring. That illustrates the depth of the brand's roster.

STATE of NWA-TNA

Last year at this time, we were just hoping that we would have a "State Of NWA-TNA" to write in 2003. We're happy to report that the company has made a lot of progress since then, and that there's good reason to be cautiously optimistic about the future

Photos by Vern Verna

ONE YEAR AGO, NWA-TNA was a promotion still trying to find its feet. It was able to walk, but most of its steps were of the baby variety. The company was afraid to do too much too quickly, and it relied on wrestling's past a bit too heavily to try to carry it into the sport's future.

For example, looking at the promotion's roster this time last year, it's clear that ownership, while dedicated workaholics, didn't yet have a vision for the company. So it took the safe route. The roster was a camp of former WCW and WWE throwaways, such as Brian Lawler, Syxx-Pac, Scott Hall, and Buff Bagwell, and TNA's dependency on former big-name stars didn't instill much confidence in fans. Sure, they added a little star power, but their inclusion on the roster created week-to-week chaos that not even the most organized promoter could have overcome. And because of the wide variety of names employed by the promotion—and because of their oftentimes big egos—TNA's pay-per-views were terribly inconsistent. One week, the PPV was a helter-skelter promofest with a lot of comedy tossed in. The next week, the company changed direction to focus its attention on the actual in-ring wrestling.

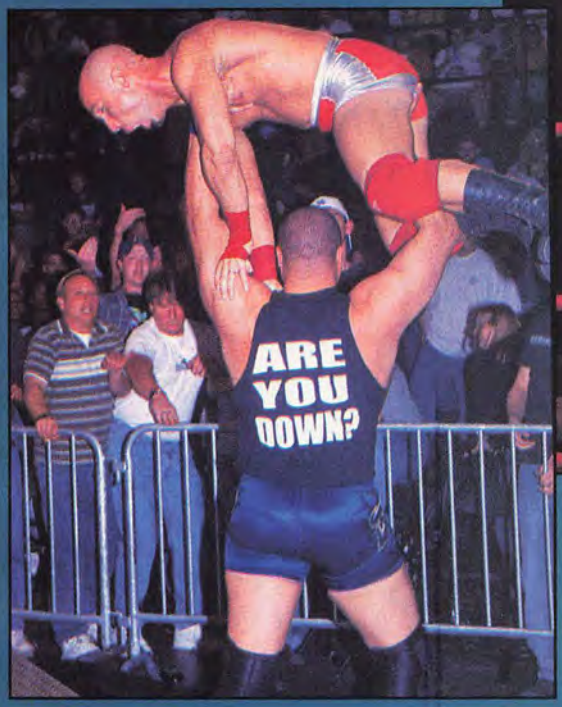
You'd have a hard time finding reasons to criticize the job A.J. Styles did as NWA heavyweight champ during the second half of 2003. He singlehandedly increased the value of the title quite a bit.

For $9.95 a week, it's pretty safe to say that if fans are going to become regular TNA pay-per-view purchasers, they're going to want to know what they're going to get for their money. TNA, which was still in its infancy, was unable to provide any kind of reliable format, mostly because it was trying to figure out the format that would work best for pay-per-view and only pay-per-view. Every week was an experiment, the result of which generally required further experiments. Back then, it was a seemingly endless cycle. And while TNA did improve, it was imperative that the company find its focus.

A year later NWA-TNA officials are a year wiser. The promotion has new majority ownership, Panda Energy, and from all accounts, the new owners seem committed to learning what makes professional wrestling work. They're just not handing the reins of the promotion to the former majority owners, Jeff and Jerry Jarrett, with blank checks ready for distribution, either. Instead, they're getting a hands-on education, and so far their interest in and influence on the company has been beneficial for all involved.

One of the most important things that the new ownership has done since taking over is locking up

Michael Shane was anchoring what was a strong X division as of mid-October (right), while D-Lo Brown and Chris Daniels were two fine mid-card players who were both getting time at the main event level (below). Top to bottom, the TNA roster looks very good.



most of TNA's roster members to one-year contracts. Not only does this prevent WWE from conducting a talent raid if TNA starts to threaten its position, it also instills a sense of family in the locker room.

Now everyone in the locker room knows that everyone else is committed to making the promotion work. This may seem like a little thing, but believe us, it can make all the difference in the world. Now that TNA has put some faith in its stable of wrestlers, its stable of wrestlers is more willing to put faith in it.

Another interesting change that TNA has made is its decision to bring in Dutch Mantel, who most recently turned around Puerto Rico's IWA promotion, as head booker. Jeff Jarrett and Vince Russo did an admirable job on the creative end, but they were unable to come up with a consistent plan of attack. The hope inside the TNA camp is that Mantel (with help from Jarrett and Russo) will establish a distinct identity for the promotion and help it focus on a handful of compelling feuds at a time. If all goes well, he'll come up with new, fresh ideas.

The new ownership hasn't changed everything, though. There are still more than enough former WCW and WWE castoffs to make a wrestling fan of five or 10 years ago feel comfortable—but the company has retained the best of the best and gotten rid of the troublemakers and the high-priced talent who added little or nothing to the promotion. Jeff Jarrett, the man who still wields the most backstage power, is consistently near the top of the card, where he should be.

Meanwhile, Raven and Shane Douglas, top tier players for ECW in the past, have quietly established themselves as dependable go-to men.

Dusty Rhodes continues to thrill crowds, despite the fact that he last held the NWA championship way back in 1986.

Ron Killings, Konnan, and B.G. James, the trio otherwise known as 3 Live Kru, have been very effective in their role as TNA's self-proclaimed persecuted. They can be very cutting-edge funny, but they are also pursuing the NWA tag team title.

Jerry Lynn is as steady an influence on the promotion as any veteran wrestler could be. He looks just as comfortable working with fellow veterans as he does up-and-comers and fits anywhere on the card.

Even D-Lo Brown, who has been criticized in some circles for underachieving since arriving from WWE, has worked admirably with TNA's lesser-known wrestlers and has made for a credible challenger for the NWA belt.

Jeff Jarrett will always be a key player in TNA, both in front of the cameras and behind the scenes. He'll continue to have a great deal of influence on whether the company is a long-term success or failure.

STATE of NWA-TNA

Other recent signings, such as those of Simon Diamond, Johnny Swinger, and Don Callis, are working out for the promotion as well. And don't be surprised if Christopher Daniels gets into the main event mix in the next six months.

However, it's the newcomers that are becoming the real difference-makers. And if you need proof of this, all you need to do is look in the direction of five-year veteran A.J. Styles. Styles, who captured the NWA championship by beating Jarrett and Raven in a triple threat match for the title in June, did what so many other recent NWA champions haven't done: He elevated the championship instead of waiting for the championship to elevate him. He made the title seem important again, and not just by his appearances on TNA's pay-per-views, either.

Styles brought the championship back to its roots by becoming a touring champion, something that no other NWA titlist of the TNA era attempted to do. He defended the title against a number of different opponents on cards promoted by non-NWA-affiliated independent promotions such as Ring of Honor. In doing so, he became more than a well-known NWA champion—he also helped raise the profile of NWA-TNA among fans who had never given the promotion a chance.

Two other relative unknowns also helped elevate NWA-TNA's status. The team of America's Most Wanted, Chris Harris and James Storm, who had captured the NWA tag team championship twice in 2003 as of press time, showed everyone that just because wrestlers have a generic independent look to them doesn't necessarily mean that they wrestle like run-of-the-mill independent wrestlers. Harris and Storm are good, so good that they could thrive in WWE—and that's not a knock on TNA.

If anything, it's a compliment. It means that WWE isn't necessarily where all of the best talent is found. It means that TNA, despite running its weekly shows inside the Nashville Fairgrounds Auditorium (a.k.a. TNA Asylum) in front of 1,000 or so fans, is finding gems and exposing them to a national audience for the very first time.

It means that TNA, despite WWE's wide reach and overabundance of TV exposure, is developing—not signing away or stealing away—a nice roster of its very own.

Raven and Shane Douglas revisited their old ECW feud in TNA this fall, though they made it more interesting by getting some lesser-known players involved.

More proof of this exists when you take a look at TNA's X division. The division features some of the best young high-flyers in the world, and it continues to be featured prominently on TNA's pay-per-views. Michael Shane, cousin to WWE's Shawn Michaels, has been a pleasant surprise for TNA officials. His character has been a bit hard to follow at times, but with slower, more methodical booking, he could become even more effective than he already is. Chris Sabin, Shane's biggest rival in the X division, looks a bit like Shane and wrestles a bit like Shane, so he's been a little hard to figure out as well, but he continues to show a lot of potential. Frankie Kazarian might be the best of the X division bunch, but because he has yet to win the championship, he's not getting the respect he deserves. That should change in the future.

Despite what we've written about the X division, though, there is cause for concern. When TNA was launched in June 2002, the X division was touted as a high-flying division, not a cruiserweight division. TNA officials opened up the division to wrestlers of all sizes; as long as you could wrestle fast-paced, high-risk matches, you were welcome to join, weight be damned.

The idea was great, but the follow-through was a little lacking.

While X matches continue to be highly anticipat-

TNA has found the perfect role for ex-Big Three stars Konnan, Ron Killings, and B.G. James. They formed the sometimes-serious, often-outrageous clique known as 3 Live Kru.

out of pay-per-view. If Hogan generates enough positive publicity (he was scheduled to face Jeff Jarrett in the main event of the first three-hour TNA PPV, to be held on Sunday, November 30), TNA might find itself with a significant increase in buys and national recognition, and maybe even a regular weekly time slot with a prominent cable-TV network.

However, if it doesn't go well, TNA might be forced to face the fact that it will never escape pay-per-view—and Hogan might be finally forced to face retirement.

Watching this relationship play out should be interesting, because Hogan and TNA is a marriage made out of desperation. They probably don't want to work together (TNA is not quite established enough for Hogan; Hogan is too expensive for TNA to use regularly), but given their respective circumstances (TNA struggling for more recognition and a cable-TV contract; Hogan struggling for redemption following his fallout with WWE), they probably don't have any other options. The fact that Vince Russo, who publicly humiliated Hogan at the 2000 Bash at the Beach pay-per-view, works on TNA's creative team only further illustrates this point.

They wouldn't work together unless they had to, but because they have to, they will.

In many ways, that last line spells out TNA's current situation. TNA wouldn't be a strictly pay-per-view promotion unless it had to, but because it has to, it'll deal with the situation until a better one presents itself. Hogan might or might not help, but the rest of its roster definitely will. They'll do their best to earn your pay-per-view dollar while also trying to move the company onto a more stable financial foundation. It's going to be hard work, but what else is new? For the longest time, TNA officials and wrestlers were working hard to avoid extinction. Now that they're working toward something, working hard should be easier than ever.

The momentum is now theirs. Let's see what they do with it. □

ed by TNA fans, we're sad to say that the division has, indeed, become something of a cruiserweight division. Shane stands 5'11" and weighs 221 pounds; Sabin, 6', 215; Kazarian, 6'1", 220; Kid Kash, 5'9", 202. Most of the other X division competitors are of similar size. Where are the bigger men who should be competing in this division? If TNA officials want to keep the division true to its original ideal (and we think they should), they should go out of their way to find some high-flying big men. And the big men don't have to be huge, either. D-Lo Brown would be a good fit. So would Sonny Siaki, who had a run with the X title nearly a year ago.

They should look outside of TNA, too. Devon Storm, the former Crowbar in WCW, has made the occasional appearance in TNA, but he would be a great addition to the division. TNA might also try looking overseas or to Mexico a little more. It already uses a revitalized Juventud Guerrera from south of the border and Nosawa from the Orient on a semi-regular basis. We're sure that there are a glut of international stars willing to travel to Nashville for an opportunity to wrestle for a nationally televised North American promotion.

We never thought this would be the case, but it is: Hulk Hogan is a key to the potential future success of NWA-TNA, even if he makes only a handful of appearances.

Staying on the subject of wrestlers looking for an opportunity to wrestle for a nationally televised North American promotion, it's probably about time we get to Hulk Hogan's involvement with the group. First talked about during the early fall, Hogan's run with TNA might be the thing that TNA needs to break

STATE of INDEPENDENT WRESTLING

Survival is the buzzword for independent promotions during this latest wrestling recession. And it's not easy. It seems like a lot of the smaller companies are doing their best not to copy WWE

Ring of Honor, most experts would agree, is the country's hottest independent right now. ROH features outstanding, no-frills technical wrestling on each show. Britain's Doug Williams (shown against Tom Carter) is one of many regulars to add an international influence to the company.

THE DOMINANCE, AND subsequent stagnation of the WWE product at one end of the pro wrestling spectrum has led to a proliferation of sorts at the opposite end of the spectrum. There seem to be more independent promotions popping up every day—though not all of them last very long—trying to provide a somewhat jaded wrestling audience with a WWE alternative. Exposure is the elusive ingredient that most independents are lacking, as even the most densely populated territories struggle to draw solid crowds on a regular basis. Some areas of the country have dozens of independents situated close together, but many of the most ardent wrestling fans aren't even aware of all the events going on in their backyards. More than ever, the issue facing the independents isn't so much variety as it is getting people to notice.

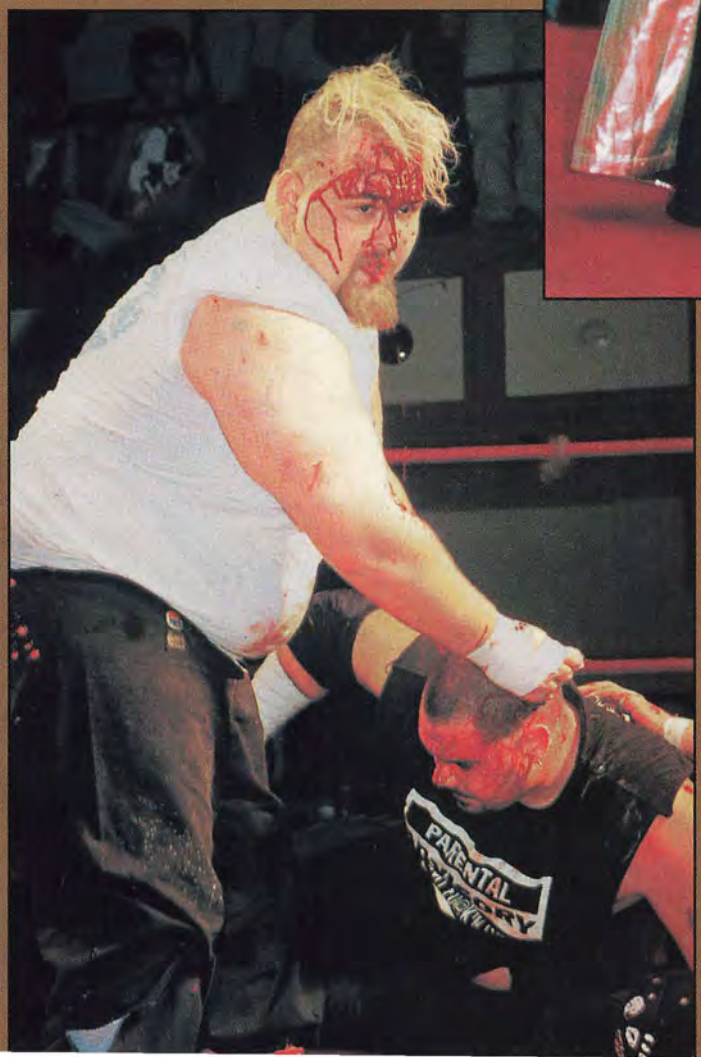
A new generation of stars has hit the independents, and one thing that distinguishes this generation is that to a surprising percentage of these young men and women, the ultimate goal is *not* to reach the WWE, but somewhere outside the country. Now, a whole crop of young independents look to Japan or Mexico as an ultimate goal, and trying to hone a physique or learn a style that would appeal to WWE talent scouts is largely irrelevant. The result is more independent companies that embrace the foreign styles of wrestling.

In the last year, Pennsylvania-based Ring of Honor has carved out a very loyal following everywhere it has gone (and it is expanding rapidly and successfully), with an in-ring style largely borrowed from Japanese *puroresu* companies of the mid-1990s. Although a handful of Ring of Honor stars have been cherry-picked by WWE (Spanky, Paul London, and new developmental signee Alexis Laree), many of the company's wrestlers appear overseas with Zero-One, a Japanese company operated by Shinya Hashimoto.

ROH is hardly the only promotion with close ties to the Orient, however. Major League Wrestling, based in Florida, boasts an international roster that includes men like Satoshi Kojima and Mike Awesome (both of All-Japan Pro Wrestling) and entered into a talent agreement with arguably Japan's hottest independent, Ultimo Dragon's Toryumon. MLW's weekly television show can even be seen in a variety of markets throughout the United States, and with Joey Styles hosting the program, seems justly reminiscent of ECW broadcasts. MLW and ROH even share many of the same American independent stars. Unfortunately, the cancellation of an MLW TV taping in October (it only runs one show per month) left many worried about the company's future.

To many promoters, ECW was the defining independent company of the last

Finding a niche is important to many independents in 2003. Ian Rotten, famous for wrestling in a lot of bloodbaths (below), offers both hardcore and technical wrestling in IWA Mid-South. And promoter Gary Juster recently discovered that Lucha stars like El Hijo del Santo (right) can draw well in unlikely areas.



decade, and ECW owed a debt of gratitude to Japan's FMW promotion, where extreme wrestling grew to mainstream popularity. The death matches held by FMW, W*ING, and similar promotions could probably never be duplicated on a major U.S. show, but a handful of American promotions are trying to tread a similar path.

Combat Zone Wrestling, an East Coast fixture for years now, closely resembles FMW's extreme style, with barbed wire, thumbtacks, broken glass, and assorted other frightful objects being part of the regular routine. It has cultivated a decent following with a strange mix of traditional and extreme wrestling, and the company's videotapes are among the most widely circulated of any current independent company. In the Midwest, Ian Rotten's IWA Mid-South showcases this style as well, and in fact, like the IWA in Japan, Rotten's IWA features an annual King of

☆★STATE of INDEPENDENT WRESTLING★☆

The fact that OVW is the only WWE developmental territory does give it advantages over other smaller promotions. Yet Jim Cornette regularly loses talent to the parent company and must rebuild. One of his top stars now is Bane, but he could be promoted on short notice, too.

the Death Matches Tournament that is among the bloodiest wrestling affairs conducted in this country. IWA Mid-South is also known to feature some terrific technical wrestling, so much so that its Ted Petty Invitational Tournament could someday become the Midwest equivalent of the ECWA Super 8, consider by many to be the country's premier annual independent event.

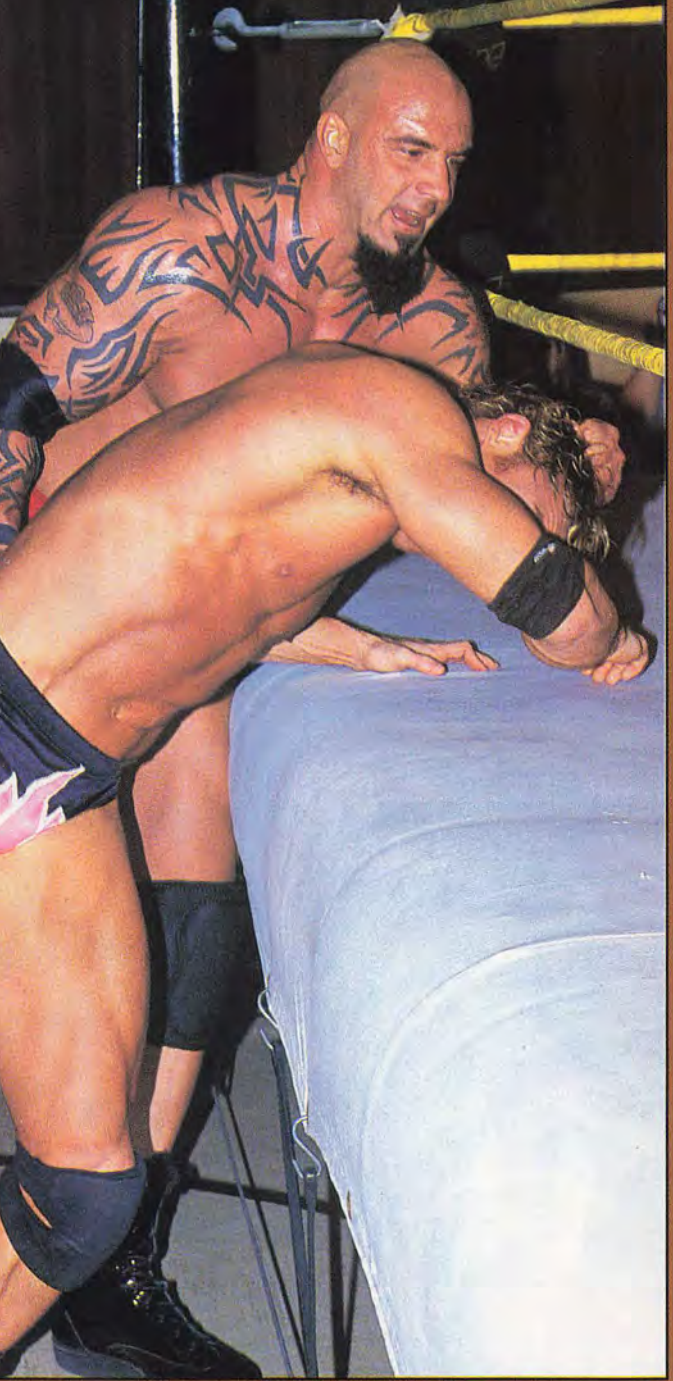
The influence of Japanese wrestling is also obvious on the West Coast, where Pro Wrestling Iron is almost an American version of Mitsuharu Misawa's Pro Wrestling NOAH promotion. This is no small coincidence. Pro Wrestling Iron founders Michael Modest and Donovan Morgan have been NOAH regulars for years now. Misawa himself even appeared on one California card hosted by the group. Revolution Pro, another California independent, is known for a strike-heavy, high-impact style made famous by All-Japan Pro Wrestling more than a decade ago. The group's top star, Super Dragon, has even toured with All-Japan. Independents that embrace the *puroresu* style as opposed to the traditional American pro wrestling style can be found in every corner of the country.

New WWE signee Paul London beat Alex Arion and two others to win the 2003 ECWA Super 8. Some promotions, like the ECWA, find that the traditional family-friendly approach can still work on the indy level.

Likewise, the growing popularity of Lucha Libre isn't confined to Mexico. One of the biggest independents cards in recent United States history took place just a few months ago in Atlanta. Promoter Gary Juster presented an all-Lucha Libre card headlined by El Hijo del Santo and drew more than 4,000 fans (which is more than a lot of WWE house shows draw now), which seems to be proof of the form's enduring popularity in the States. Lucha-influenced companies aren't just in the obvious spots like Southern California and Texas, where the proximity to Mexico makes for an easy crossover.

Although the San Diego region is still host to numerous Lucha shows on a monthly basis, and Texas has even become a semi-regular stop for Lucha company AAA, the style is penetrating the American scene more than ever before.

Pennsylvania may seem like an unlikely spot to find the influence of Mexican wrestling, but Allentown-based CHIKARA has found its niche there. An odd blend of international styles, offbeat characters, and

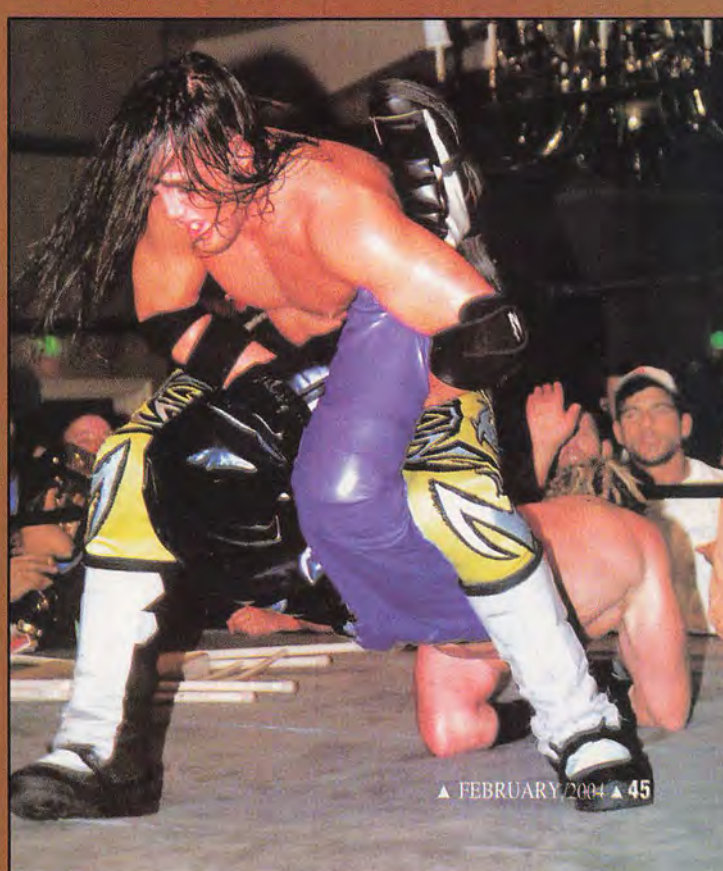


experimental storytelling have made the company a favorite of Lucha fans and especially kids. In Chicago, the OMLL is a well-kept secret outside the circle of fervent fans that pack its venue on a weekly basis. The events are conducted entirely in Spanish, and both the locker room and the arena are filled with Hispanics. Lucha Libre appeals to fans of all ethnicities though, as New York-based Lucha Xtreme Wrestling proves, with its largely non-Hispanic audience. Using top names like Shocker and Ultimo Guerrero (two of EMLL's biggest attractions) to try to build a fan base, LXW is one of many new independent companies to pop up in the Empire State in the last year.

Of course, there's no shortage of independent companies offering traditional American pro wrestling. Delaware's East Coast Wrestling Association, under the guidance of Jim Kettner, has been chugging along consistently for a truly remarkable 35 years. World League Wrestling, the creation of Harley Race, has a decidedly old school feel to it and is garnering more support in the Midwest. 3PW is starting to branch out of the Philadelphia market and venturing into new territories. However, the recent demise of long-standing promotions like Maryland Championship Wrestling and IPW Hardcore (in Florida) have hurt the circuit overall, as both produced some very talented wrestlers and offered a quality, consistent in-ring product. For some promoters, working so many hours to produce shows that are, at best, marginally profitable isn't worth the effort after a while.

The WWE, of course, continues to operate its own independent, Ohio Valley Wrestling, with Jim Cornette overseeing the evolution of developmental talent and creation of tomorrow's WWE stars. Randy Orton, Rico, Brock Lesnar, John Cena, The Basham Brothers and many other current WWE superstars have come up through the developmental ranks, and since WWE severed ties with Les Thatcher's Heartland Wrestling Association, OVW has become *the* training ground for the WWE's up-and-comers. For a select few independent wrestlers, making it to OVW is the first step toward superstardom. □

An emotional showdown between long-time partners Joey Matthews and Christian York was the last match Maryland Championship Wrestling offered on its final show back in the summer. It's scary to see a promotion like MCW, which was successful, shut down.



STATE of INTERNATIONAL WRESTLING

Europe, Mexico, and especially Japan certainly have been affected by a wrestling recession similar to the one we have experienced in the U.S., sometimes even more so. Just like the scene in the U.S., however, there are things to be excited about

The very same October Tokyo Dome card that saw Hulk Hogan overwhelm Masa Chono (left) also saw Bob Sapp battle Manabu Nakanishi in a 10-man match that saw a number of mixed martial artists compete (above). The battle of legends was a hit. Mixing wrestling and shootfighting in Japan really hasn't been so far.

SINCE THE BBC canceled the pro wrestling portion of *World Of Sport* back in the 1980s, the British wrestling scene has been struggling, to say the least. The country that produced charismatic stars like Big Daddy, Adrian Street, and Giant Haystacks, as well as technical wizards like Johnny Saint, George Kidd, and Steve Gray hit a slump that endured for more than a decade. As the popularity of the WWE television product increased throughout the United Kingdom, the public's taste for the decidedly less-flashy British mat style waned.

Since the turn of the century, though, the scene in Great Britain has begun to rebound, and as European wrestling as a whole begins to make a comeback, the English are leading the way. Companies like the Frontier Wrestling Alliance, which showcases modern mat masters like Doug Williams and Johnny Storm, are finding a brand new

audience for the almost-lost British style. With so many fans burned out on the current style of pro wrestling, with its four-minute "microwaved" matches, the retro style has become a welcome alternative to many. Visiting stars from American independent companies like Ring of Honor and Combat Zone Wrestling have been received well by the Brits.

England isn't the only country in Europe in which an interest in sound technical wrestling has started to resurface. Italian Championship Wrestling has been running regular cards near Genova, Italy, for several months now, with a steadily growing audience. Further east, the Swiss Wrestling Federation outside of Zurich has established a regular following, and has even established a school to train prospective wrestlers. A few hours north of Switzerland, German Stampede Wrestling and Westside Xtreme Wrestling have been battling for dominance in Germany, and both have showcased an array of foreign stars, from Chris Hero to A.J. Styles, to help draw in new fans. More than ever, the European scene is poised for a comeback, as fans are finally coming out to support promotions other than WWE, and more independents are springing up everywhere from London to Lucerne.

Heck, for the first time in years, smaller shows are being held in France and Finland!

In Japan, this retro style is also alive and well. New Japan Pro Wrestling has hosted a series of matches in the last year to showcase the 1970s technical style that *puroresu* fans associate with Dory Funk Jr. and Karl Gotch. The niche attraction has proven popular enough that some New Japan stars, like Osamu Nishimura and Manabu Nakanishi, are often sent to the United States to train under these grappling legends. On a larger scale, New Japan's experiment with crossover stars of the mixed martial arts world has proven to be a flop, and New Japan's business is at an all-time low. A recent Tokyo Dome event, featuring the return of Hulk Hogan to New Japan, drew the promotion's smallest Dome gate in history, although that could be blamed in part on bad weather and public transportation problems.

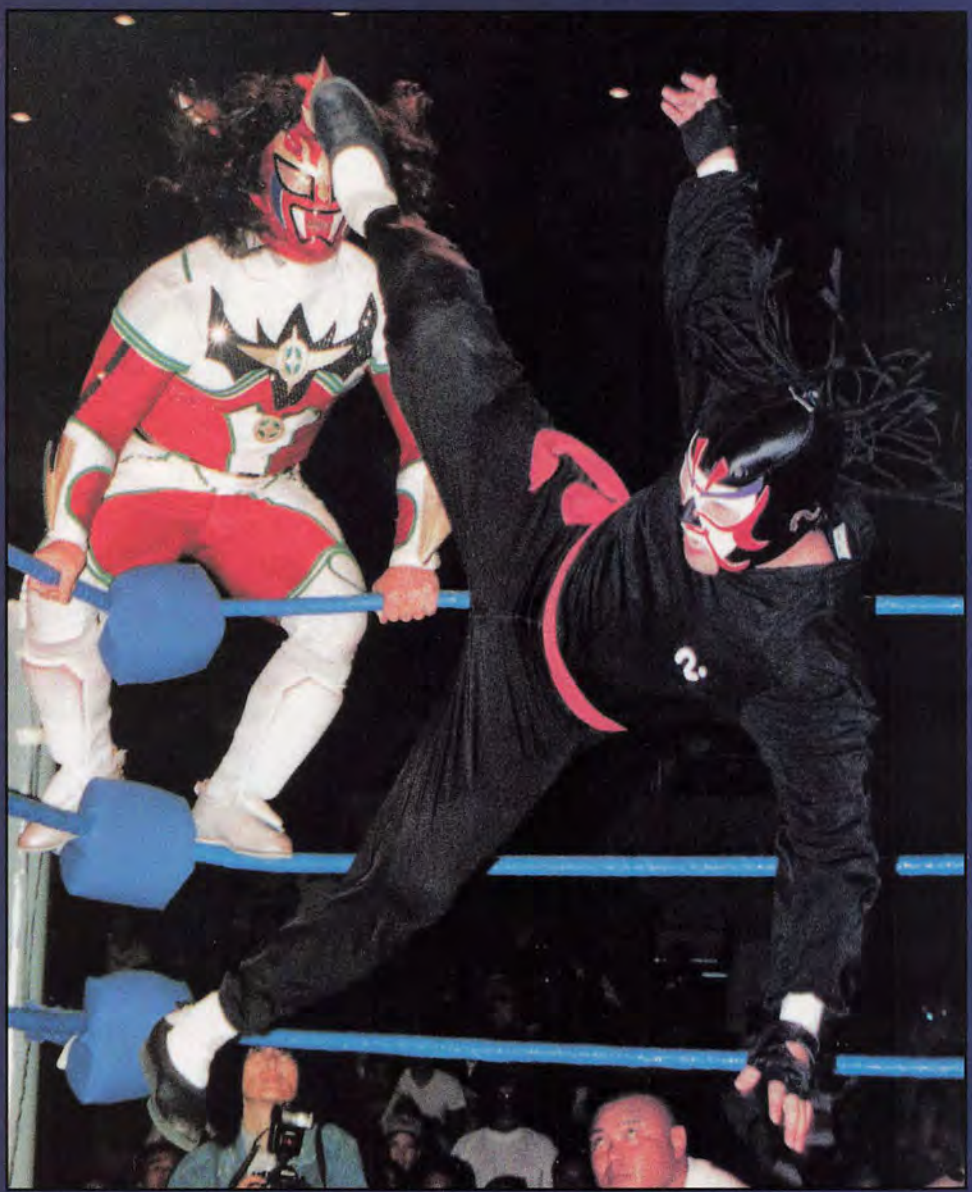
Times have gotten so tough in Japan that the fledgling WJ promotion, founded by Riki Choshu (shown in a WJ match with Genichiro Tenryu), is in danger of closing down less than a year after it opened up.

That show illustrated well one of the major problems facing New Japan and some other Japanese promotions: The Hogan-Chono match went over well with the live crowd, better than matches involving younger talent that will have to carry a big load in future years. New superstars must be created, and the sooner the better.

The news isn't much better for rival All-Japan Pro Wrestling, where things have taken a downward turn since the appointment of Keiji Muto as president more than a year ago. A short-lived partnership with K-1 to create a string of W-1 shows proved to be a failure, and since then, there has been no major collaboration between the groups to bring together the elements of wrestling and mixed martial arts. All-Japan has seen attendance figures drop over the last three financial quarters, and other promotions with a traditional *puroresu* feel, like Riki Choshu's WJ Pro and Shinya Hashimoto's Zero-One, have been feeling the effects of declining business as well. Rumors have circulated for months that some groups might have to merge together to survive much longer.

☆★STATE of INTERNATIONAL WRESTLING★☆

Great Sasuke's attempts to balance his wrestling and political careers—and a controversy surrounding his mask—have made a lot of news in Japan in the last year, and that has benefited the Michinoku Pro promotion.



Two smaller groups that haven't been affected as much by the downturn are Michinoku Pro and Toryumon. Since the election of Michinoku founder Great Sasuke to the Japanese Diet, almost all of his political and wrestling maneuverings have garnered mainstream publicity in the Orient. The result was a recent Michinoku card that broke the company's all-time attendance record, drawing some 8,000 fans to see Sasuke in action against fellow wrestling politician Atsushi Onita.

Michinoku had spent years struggling to fill small venues for its action-packed cards featuring lighter grapplers and international style wrestling. Ultimo Dragon's Toryumon, another promotion filled with cruiserweights and a decidedly Lucha flavor, draws a loyal fan base of screaming women to its events, in addition to fans of high-flying wrestling. The Toryumon's popularity with females has kept business fairly strong, as no other *puroresu* company can match its appeal to the fairer sex. Even women's wrestling promotions like the ailing GAEA promotion and the now-defunct ARSION group have drawn greater percentages of male fans than the Toryumon does.

The state of business in Mexico is pretty much identical to what was reported last year. Paco Alonso's EMLL and Antonio Pena's AAA are the country's two top promotions, and both attract large live crowds wherever they go. EMLL marked a milestone in wrestling this year, becoming the first promotion to last 70 years in the business. Every Friday night, EMLL tapes television at its home base in Mexico City, the famed Arena Mexico, often likened to Madison Square Garden.

The company boasts many of Lucha Libre's hottest acts right now, with the wildly popular Shocker as a top attraction, and Los Infiernos del Ring (Rey Bucanero and Ultimo Guerrero) being the most sought-after tag team in Mexico. Solid undercards, usually composed of trios matches, are the

staple of their weekly television program on Galavision.

Mexico City isn't the only Lucha hotbed, as Tijuana, Naucalpan, and Monterrey have booming scenes as well. The great distances between these cities have allowed the individual towns to develop their own local brands of Lucha Libre, and Tijuana in particular is noted for its crowded independent scene. In Naucalpan, the IWRG has a regular haunt in which it tapes its local television show every week, and is situated virtually right next door to the facility for Ultimo Dragon's Toryumon school. The Toryumon also runs in Naucalpan, and even loans talent to IWRG from time to time.

With all the independent companies scattered across Mexico, a fan can catch any one of at least a half-dozen Lucha Libre cards being held every night of the week!

Last year, it seemed like the warring factions in Puerto Rico, the WWC and the IWA, were neck-and-neck in the promotional battle. Since then, things have taken an interesting turn, as the IWA, a promotion operated by Victor Quinones, has surpassed Carlos Colon's WWC group, and is beating

Business in Mexico isn't exactly booming these days, but AAA and EMLL and various independents are chugging forward as best they can. AAA promoter Antonio Pena recently made an appearance on a TNA pay-per-view.

The European independent scene continues to make a nice comeback. Although that continent has some solid stars of its own, it helps when imports like former NWA heavyweight champ A.J. Styles make the occasional appearance.

it in both television ratings and attendance numbers on a consistent basis. The decline in business has resulted in some of WWC's stars jumping ship to the IWA, and one of Colon's biggest stars, his own son Carly, has been signed away by the WWE on a developmental deal. Although business in Puerto Rico in not at the same height it was a year ago, things have since taken a definite turn in the IWA's favor against Colon's group. It will continue to be an interesting war to watch. □

STATE of the STARS

Every sport needs stars, and there's no shortage of them in wrestling today. Are the men and women featured most prominently today living up to expectations? Could they take on more of a load? Let's find out ...

Wrestling is a lot like other sports in that its top performers constantly rotate. Only a precious few wrestlers have the skill, the willpower, or the dedication to remain atop the sport for more than a few years at a time. And even those wrestlers who do perform at a consistently higher level experience power surges and outages of their very own.

No one is immune to the cyclical nature of the business. Not even the biggest, strongest, and brawniest can resist its natural progression. To do so is to do the impossible.

This year is no different. Some wrestlers who were at the top of the sport this time last year didn't make the cut for this year's "State Of The Stars" section. Maybe they spent too much time injured (Booker T), maybe they left to make movies (The Rock), or maybe they simply slipped out of the spotlight (Ron Killings), but for whatever reason, their careers are at a point where they are no longer among the sport's elite regularly active competitors.

On to those who did make the list.

Even though Matt Hardy can be a real punk, he's a real talented punk, and critics are finally giving him the respect that he has long deserved. At this time last year, Eddie Guerrero was trying to re-establish his reputation as one of the sport's best all-around ring technicians following a much-publicized battle with substance abuse; now he's arguably Smackdown's most popular performer. Bill Goldberg wasn't even active in the sport a year ago; now he's the Raw champion.

Of course, there are wrestlers who were seemingly bulletproof over the course of the past year.

Brock Lesnar remains WWE's most intimidating physical presence.

Triple-H remains Raw's biggest star (and the sport's most controversial wrestler).

Kurt Angle remains the sport's most respected wrestler.

And Jeff Jarrett remains a key cog in the success of NWA-TNA, both as Jeff Jarrett the wrestler and Jeff Jarrett the businessman.

Yet even with these stalwarts, things changed. Nothing remained completely status quo—and that's exactly how we like it. After all, we'd rather

For a man with only about 20 months of WWE experience, Brock Lesnar has done an incredible job on the Smackdown side. He just needs to make sure he doesn't get complacent. Sorry, Undertaker, but fresh opponents would help.

be kept on our toes than slide off our seats with boredom. We begin our analysis by taking a look at the three main champions, as they stood at press time.

BROCK LESNAR

At this point in Lesnar's career, there isn't much he *hasn't* done. He's a four-time WWE Smackdown champion. He has main-evented WrestleMania. He's a former King of the Ring, and a winner of the 30-man over-the-top-rope Royal Rumble battle royal. He has a "Hell In A Cell" victory over The Undertaker. He's been voted *PWI's* Wrestler of the Year and was ranked number-one by the editors in the "*PWI* 500." He's beaten other legends, like The Rock and Hulk Hogan, and he's been dominant against his main rival in the sport, Kurt Angle.

And yet he's only 26 years old. He's barely into adulthood, yet he's accomplished everything he's ever set out to do.

This is a very dangerous thing when you think about it—not dangerous for you or the many wrestlers lining up for shots at Lesnar's Smackdown championship, mind you, but dangerous for Lesnar himself.

Just think about it for a second. Lesnar has accomplished almost everything there is to accomplish in wrestling. When he wakes up and rolls out of bed in the morning, he has to feel pretty satisfied with himself. Even though he's been wrestling for WWE for less than two years, he's already one of the most accomplished stars on the company's roster.

Believe it or not, this is going to create problems for Lesnar down the line—maybe as soon as the coming year. Will he be able to live up to the standard he has set for himself? Will he suffer an emotional letdown after enjoying his early success? Will he be able to keep his young head on straight with so many people telling him how great he is? We have seen enough to know that Lesnar has a strong body. What we will know soon is how strong his character is.

BILL GOLDBERG

Like Lesnar, Bill Goldberg must be feeling pretty good these days. After having to listen to every wrestling critic (including some on the *PWI* staff) tear apart the early months of his WWE career and Linda McMahon call him a disappointment, the big man has come on strong in recent months. He has won over WWE's hard-to-please fans, and his first few weeks as Raw's champion went about as smoothly as possible.

Goldberg has already lasted longer in WWE than some people predicted. He might end up having a successful run after all.

Even though you might not believe it considering the pot shots we've taken at him since his return to active competition, we're actually happy for big Bill. Anyone who takes such abuse is probably due some kind of in-your-face retribution, correct? Of course, now that Goldberg has won the championship, the hard part of his WWE career really begins. It's time for him to become the man upon whom WWE can depend to carry the brand and drive ticket sales and pay-per-view buy rates.

He's capable of doing the job. He has the skills to do it and do it well. We know this because he has done it before, when he took WCW by the throat and became a mainstream media darling in the process. Back then, he seemingly could have helped any promotion improve its bottom line; now is his chance to prove that everything he did as WCW's phenomenon wasn't a fluke.

We're going to give Goldberg the benefit of the doubt—something we haven't done too often of late—and state that now that he's climbed the hill, he'll return to his role of "Da Man" with minimal problems. And he better. Given that Triple-H and Chris Jericho are Raw's only other established top tier stars, Goldberg needs to show that he is a worthy champion in order to bolster what has been a struggling Raw roster.

A.J. Styles deserves props for being a stellar NWA champ who has increased the profile of the championship. NWA-TNA could do a little better by him, however.

A.J. STYLES

Young, inexperienced champions are nothing new in this sport. In fact, in recent years, we've seen a number of wrestlers with relatively little pro experience win

STATE of the STARS

major championships. Kurt Angle, Brock Lesnar, and Bill Goldberg are just a few of examples of relative rookies whom promotions have asked to carry their championship banners. A.J. Styles? He's simply the latest to have to deal with this daunting responsibility.

Styles is different from Angle, Lesnar, and Goldberg, though. He's neither tall nor terribly muscular. He's certainly not going to appear on a cover of *Muscle & Fitness* anytime soon. Most people probably look at him and see a fit young man who might compete with a local softball team, but that's about it. One of the last things they think he is is a wrestling champion.

And that's one of the reasons why we like Styles' championship reign so much. It's uncommon. And for that, you have to give TNA higher-ups credit. They took a chance, and soon that chance paid some nice dividends. In just a few months, Styles did more for the NWA championship than NWA officials could have possibly hoped for. He took on the title belt on the road with him wherever he went, wrestled opponents of all sizes and styles, and helped to legitimize a title that in recent years had been extremely devalued.

Right now, Styles is arguably TNA's most valuable player.

But there are problems. Why anyone thinks he needs to have Vince Russo in his corner to do much of his talking is mystifying. And what purpose his feud with Dusty Rhodes served, we're still not sure. Heck, Rhodes not only dominated Styles—he actually spanked him *(twice!)* during matches. That's a strange way to portray your champion.

All in all, Styles is doing a wonderful job, but he could actually be doing even better.

TRIPLE-H

Triple-H is still the most controversial wrestler on the WWE roster. He has been for months on end and will likely remain the most controversial for a while longer. He seems to like it that way.

"The Game" reigned supreme over Raw for most of the past year, dominating every opponent in his path. By the time fall rolled around, he had beaten everyone WWE had thrown at him—and beaten them all soundly. Because of this, Bill Goldberg was the only person who could stand across the ring from Helmsley with a shred of credibility. Not even Kane, whom WWE attempted to build up as Raw's mighty monster, seemed like a strong challenger for Helmsley. That had a little something to do with their history surrounding the surreal Katie Vick storyline. So, when Goldberg defeated Helmsley for the Raw championship, a lot of WWE insiders took their first breath in a very long time. Now that Helmsley is without the title, he'll be given a chance to rest and come back to his rightful position atop the Raw roster refreshed and reinvigorated.

Fans of wrestling can only hope that will be the case. Because while you might not believe it, Raw needs Triple-H just as much as Triple-H needs Raw. He is, without a doubt, the brand's number-one star, and barring a trade to Smackdown, he looks to remain the brand's biggest star for a very long time. Especially when the only other stars on the roster have been steamrolled by him not once or twice, but many times over.

Basically, it comes down to this: If Raw is going to turn itself around, Helmsley is going to be one of the major reasons why. If guys like Randy Orton and Maven and Rene Dupree are going to be superstars of the future, Triple-H must do his share to build them up.

A lot of Triple-H haters out there would probably like to see his injuries keep him out for an extended period. But like him or not, "The Game" needs to be a big part of Raw's future ... perhaps in a somewhat reduced role, though.

ROB VAN DAM

On Monday, September 29, RVD won the Intercontinental championship by beating Christian in a ladder match that was easily one of the most spectacular bouts ever featured on *Raw*. It was a match that should have made some folks inside WWE headquarters stand up and take notice of Van Dam's willingness to perform death-defying maneuvers and wonder if they've simply been too stubborn to let him become the main event attraction that he's seemingly been destined to become ever since he first stepped inside a wrestling ring.

Rob Van Dam is Rob Van Dam, and he isn't going to change. Likewise, WWE isn't likely to change its perception of him or his role. Don't expect him to be more than I-C champ.

Then the ratings came in. The match started at a low 3.3 and only progressed to a high of 3.6 in the overrun, one of the lowest *Raw* overrun ratings in quite some time.

Suddenly, RVD went from a sure-fire main event prospect to a wrestler whose overall popularity was being questioned again. The ladder match showcased his ability to deliver an athletic, scintillating match in the main event, but the ratings displayed that maybe his popularity has been a bit overstated in recent years.

Some of the blame for this should be dropped squarely at the feet of WWE matchmakers. The way they have booked Van Dam has been terrible at worst and suspect at best. Their refusal to allow RVD to progress to a main event slot when he was clearly the most popular wrestler on Raw's roster is now coming back to haunt them. They goofed, and now they're paying for it.

RVD isn't clear of blame, though, either. He's still delivering aloof, not-very-believable promos, and he hasn't had much character progression since joining WWE. He's still the same cool cat who stood next to Bill Alfonso and Sabu back in his ECW days, and that's unfortunate. Don't hold your breath waiting for him to climb past the Intercontinental title level.

JEFF JARRETT

Last year in this same section, we criticized Jeff Jarrett for failing to book himself enough during NWA-TNA's initial run, and we stand by that criticism. At the time, Jarrett was the most recognizable face on the roster, but he seemingly kept himself out of the spotlight as a way to demonstrate to the other wrestlers on TNA's roster that he wasn't going to overpromote himself just because he was one of the backstage power brokers. While that decision was admirable, as a former WCW champion and main event talent in WWE, he definitely needed to appear more prominently to help the struggling promotion gain credibility.

Apparently Jarrett has taken our advice (though, admittedly, we were not the only ones offering it). He captured the NWA championship since we published our last "State Of The Game" issue and he established more of a presence in TNA's upper echelon of wrestlers.

And he's done it judiciously at that!

Believe us when we tell you that Jarrett might

Jeff Jarrett has the unenviable task of trying to balance his backstage duties with his role inside the ring. And he has done a nice job of not shoving himself down TNA fans' throats.

STATE of the STARS

be the most diplomatic wrestling official/wrestler ever. He knows that he needs to appear as a prominent wrestler, but he also knows that if he overexposes himself and dominates the NWA championship scene, he'll be criticized as an overbearing boss, and TNA will be regarded as the Jeff Jarrett show. That's why he wore the NWA championship, but only for so long. And instead of getting into a feud with an established wrestler over the title, Jarrett feuded with A.J. Styles—helping to make the young man in the process. Now he's feuding with Christopher Daniels, a very popular wrestler among the Internet crowd but still a relative unknown among mainstream fans.

Jarrett is doing everything he can—both as an office member and an in-ring talent—to help TNA succeed. What more can we ask of the guy?

CHRIS JERICHO

Chris Jericho is Raw's self-proclaimed MVP, a moniker that he could have started using after having read *PWI* describe him as such in these very pages. It's a description that befits his contribution to the brand, even if it doesn't exactly describe his position in the company. After all, Triple-H is the brand's biggest star, and Bill Goldberg is its champion. Jericho, however, is the glue that holds the brand together. He feuds with mid-carders and main-eventers simultaneously, and he's even working on an intriguing feud with co-GM "Stone-Cold" Steve Austin despite Austin's inability to get in the ring and wrestle.

What can't Jericho do? Well, it seems as if he can't convince WWE that he's worth investing in as a top echelon wrestler. Sure, the company built a nice little set for him for his "Highlight Reel" segments, but it has yet to let him establish himself as a consistent threat to the Raw title. It doesn't trust him to carry the brand as its number-one star, despite the fact that he's still one of the most effective personalities and one of the best wrestlers on either WWE roster. It refuses to give him the respect that he deserves, hence his quick dismissal in Goldberg's first defense of the WWE championship.

For his part, Jericho seems comfortable with his position, because his job performance hasn't fallen off a bit. He goes out every week and does what he's always done, which is entertain the heck out of all of us. We must continue to hope WWE will reward him for his dedication in the very near future.

If WWE can keep Kurt Angle healthy, it need not worry much about his performances, no matter the opponent. He's as good as a wrestler gets.

KURT ANGLE

In four short years, Kurt Angle has established himself as the pre-eminent wrestler of his generation. It may be hard to believe, but it's true. Yes, it's damn, true. He has passed by Chris Benoit, Eddie Guerrero, and Bret Hart on lists detailing the best of the best, and once his career is over, he might just be regarded as the best professional wrestler ever.

Ever.

That kind of praise doesn't come lightly, which is why we feel we have to defend ourselves, so here we go. His matches are almost always the best on the card—no matter his opponent. He could be wrestling a piece of wood, and somehow he'd get that wood to wrestle a four-star match.

Angle is also highly respected for his dedication to the sport. How many other wrestlers would have undergone a still-experimental neck

Chris Jericho can pretty much do it all for the Raw brand. And he is asked to do a lot, except wrestle at the main event level every night.

surgery in order to return to the ring quicker than expected? He was a guinea pig of sorts for that surgery, but because he wanted to resume his in-ring career as quickly as possible, he took the chance—the biggest of his career. So far, it's worked out, and now other WWE personnel have followed Angle's example and undergone the same surgery.

As for his backstage demeanor, you'll find no superstar wrestler who is more respected. Angle simply doesn't play politics, and he doesn't stand for others playing politics, either. He expects everyone to do his job to the best of his ability, and do it with a minimum of bickering.

In other words, Angle represents everything that is good about the wrestling industry. He is one of the great ones. Let's keep him healthy and let him shine.

Trish Stratus gets knocked down, thrown around, even turned upside down. Yet she keeps coming back strong, still looks great, and is as popular as ever.

TRISH STRATUS

When Trish Stratus started wrestling, she had a hard time earning anyone's respect. Maybe it was because she was stunningly beautiful, maybe it was because women's wrestling wasn't taken too seriously when she began locking up, maybe it was because she started her career as a valet, or maybe it was the fact that every time she made her way to the ring, we had to listen to Jerry "The King" Lawler start screaming about her "puppies." Heck, maybe it was the fact that she just wasn't all that good.

Whatever the case, Stratus now has our respect. She no longer has anything to prove. Yes, she is one of the most beautiful women to ever hold the WWE women's championship, but there's no doubt that she didn't get where she is today on looks alone. She's a consummate wrestler, and she has the respect of just about every wrestling fan, official, and critic covering the sport today.

Stratus doesn't just make the wrestling match she's in better, either. Take a look around WWE's women's division, and you'll see that she's surrounded by top-quality talent, too. Arguments could me made that Victoria, Molly Holly, Jazz, and Lita are just as good as her in the ring—and maybe even better, but because Stratus is the woman who gets most of the headlines, the other women push themselves harder to stand out. In fact, those five women continually strive to outdo one another, and that results in matches that get better and better.

Stratus may never be regarded as the best woman wrestler ever (Fabulous Moolah seemingly has that title locked up for good), but don't be shocked if historians one day regard her as the best of the current generation.

MATT HARDY

Matt Hardy is in the middle of his breakout year—or at least he should be. His WWE cruiserweight title reign was the most entertaining run of his career, and it was certainly a highlight of the

Matt Hardy hasn't been rewarded with a bigger push since his fine run as cruiserweight champion. Look for him to make a lot of noise in 2004, however.

STATE of the STARS

Smackdown brand's weekly broadcasts. However, when it was all over, Hardy was feeling left out. There weren't any strong feuds waiting for him, and there weren't any real strong opponents waiting, either. Despite his success as the cruiserweight champion, WWE officials had seemingly gotten enough of his "Mattitude" campaign. Not long after, he became little more than mid-card filler.

This isn't what should have happened, but looking at Smackdown's roster, maybe it was inevitable. The brand is filled with stellar smallish wrestlers who eat up large chunks of TV time, and Hardy has to compete with all of them. And Kurt Angle, Eddie Guerrero, and Chris Benoit aren't exactly slouches in the ring. Unfortunately for Hardy, Vince McMahon is probably only going to let so many smallish wrestlers approach the top of the card, and right now Hardy is the odd man out.

John Cena is seemingly being groomed slowly for a main event spot in WWE. And the slow, gradual push looks like the right way to go. A feud with Kurt Angle will help him.

A trade to Raw might help his career out, but we don't see that happening. WWE seems committed to keeping the brands separate, and the longer that it can go without trading wrestlers between rosters, the better off the whole brand extension will be. In the meantime, the best Hardy can hope for is probably a run with the U.S. title—but only after white-hot Eddie Guerrero has finished his run with it. Until then, Hardy is going to have to find a niche and exploit it, because right now, he's stuck in mid-card limbo.

JOHN CENA

If Matt Hardy was supposed to be in the midst of his breakout year, maybe he can look at John Cena and blame him for stealing it away from him. What Cena has done over the past 12 months hasn't been groundbreaking considering what Bill Goldberg, Kurt Angle, and Brock Lesnar did in the first years of their respective WWE careers, but it's still been something special. Who would have thought that a wrestler with a character based on a mix of Vanilla Ice and Eminem would have taken off so mightily?

One interesting thing to note is that Cena has been sitting right at the bottom of the top tier (or at the very top of the mid-card, depending on how you look at it) for a while, but it hasn't stunted his growth like it would—and has done—to other wrestlers. He has been able to balance the good of being in the main event mix with the bad of losing most of his main event matches (or at least the ones that really matter), and it's enabled him to become one of the most popular wrestlers on Smackdown's roster—even though he is a rather despicable heel.

If there's any knock on Cena, it's that his wrestling skills aren't *quite* ready for the main event. We disagree. Sure, he's not quite a Chris Benoit, but he's also not a Tugboat. And we're pretty certain that the fans haven't noticed his minor shortcomings in the ring, more than likely because they're so into his character.

All of the above aside, the best thing about Cena is that he's a member of the Smackdown roster, which is filled with main event talent, so he can be pushed slowly up to the top tier instead of thrust into it. And that might be the best thing for his career.

KANE

Has anybody had a more up-and-down year than Kane? He's been accused of murder and necrophilia, unmasked, and turned into a raving lunatic. He's been brought to the ring in shackles, been forced to feud with the boss' son, lit Jim Ross on fire, and pushed into a flaming

We're sure a lot of people are second-guessing themselves for calling for the unmasking of Kane. Well, you definitely can't say he's predictable or stale anymore.

dumpster—only to show up the following week on *Raw* with nary a scratch, let alone disfiguring burns.

Wasn't this the guy who was supposed to look like a charcoal briquette underneath the mask and ring attire?

Yes, Kane's career needs damage control, but that seems like the last thing that's destined to happen. WWE seems more than happy to continue his train wreck of a year. Ever since losing his mask, he's been the focal point of many key storylines, but none of them has helped to establish exactly who he is or why he's acting in such an egregious manner. You have to believe that WWE has been doing its best to reestablish him as a top tier performer, but everything he's been put through has made him appear anything but—especially in the new style of "realistic" wrestling that fans favor nowadays.

Now, we have to admit, if we were forced to book Kane, we're not sure what we'd do, either. It's a very tough call. He's has such a dark history that you have to play off of it, but how far do you take it? In our opinion, WWE has taken it a bit too far, but the promotion is in a very difficult position. It's an experiment in progress, and for Kane's benefit, let's hope the experiment ends well.

EDDIE GUERRERO

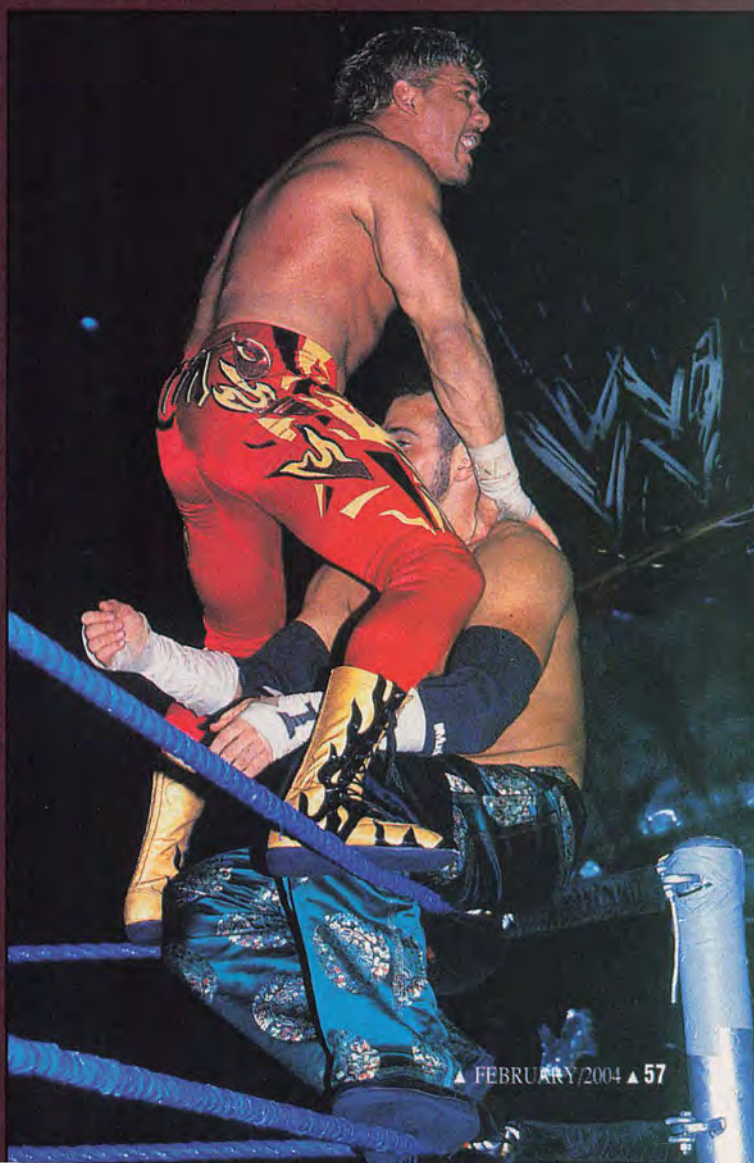
"Latino Heat" has never been hotter, and for Eddie Guerrero, success like this couldn't have come at a better time. Following an extensive battle with substance abuse, Guerrero thoroughly immersed himself in professional wrestling, lost himself in training, and committed himself to becoming better than ever before.

Amazing enough, that's exactly what he is: better than ever before.

It's not that Guerrero's wrestling is better (he has long been one of the best in the world). There hasn't been much for him to do to improve upon that aspect of his career. The thing that has Guerrero on top of WWE is his lyin', cheatin', and stealin' character. Even though fans should hate him, they can't help but love him. He's another example of a rebel-with-a-cause character (just like "Stone-Cold" Steve Austin) that fans continue to support in spite of his devious nature.

Now the issue is whether Guerrero will be given a chance to reach the very top of the top tier. Throughout his career, he has only been allowed to climb just so far up the ladder, but then again, he has never been this hot. If he's going to compete for—and maybe even win—the Smackdown championship, now is the time for him to make it happen. If it doesn't work, WWE can quickly relegate him back to his position as the brand's hottest mid-carder without much hoopla, but it's certainly worth giving Guerrero a shot. □

Right now it doesn't appear as if there is any logical reason for WWE *not* to push Eddie Guerrero to the very top of Smackdown cards. He has an Austin-like appeal.



STATE of the ART

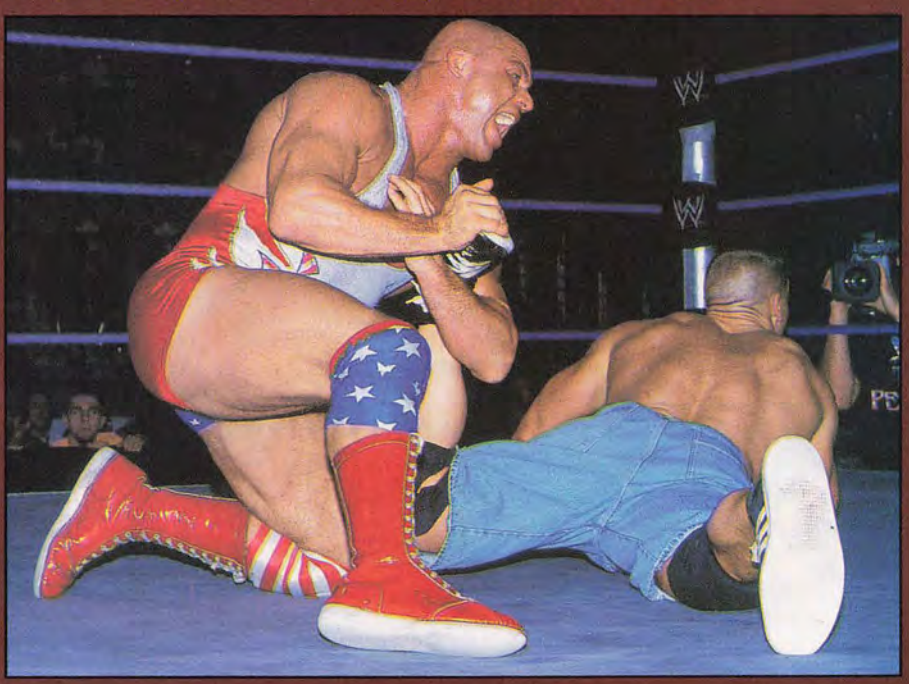
Technical wrestling has made a major comeback in the last few years. While masters like Angle, Benoit, and Styles are thriving, the pendulum might be starting to swing the other way

THE STATE OF the art of technical wrestling depends upon your point of view.

On one hand, technical masters such as Kurt Angle, Eddie Guerrero, Tajiri, and Chris Benoit continue to thrive on Smackdown shows. Meanwhile, Chris Jericho, Christian, and Rob Van Dam continue to be major players for the Raw brand. The internationally influenced Ring of Honor promotion continues to expand and expose more fans to the catch-as-catch can, move-to-countermove style. NWA-TNA's thrilling X division continues to elevate young technicians and high-flyers to national prominence in jaw-dropping matches.

With all that in mind, a case could be made that the state of the art of wrestling is stronger than it has been in a generation. While pure power wrestlers are still making an impact, even musclebound monsters are adding more scientific moves to their repertoire. Case in point is The Undertaker, who continues to develop moves such as the triangle choke and Dragon sleeper to complement his power attack, as well as former NCAA champion Brock Lesnar, who dusts off his grappling skills when needed. Save for the occasional pay-per-view spectacle, hardcore wrestling has all but vanished from WWE, though it does have a home in TNA.

Kurt Angle could and maybe should be ushering in a wonderful era of great technical wrestling in WWE. Yet Vince McMahon and company are a little hesitant to emphasize straight wrestling too much over backstage skits and outlandish storylines.



All in all, a strong technical wrestler has a better chance of finding work in late-2003 than he did in late-1993. And that speaks strongly about the state of the art today.

But there's a flipside to this argument.

In September, Smackdown promoted a *televised* one-hour "Ironman" match between Angle and Lesnar. That was a WWE first, and a bold experiment to see if a longer, slower-paced match could satisfy fans weaned on four-minute bouts and backstage skits. The fact that WWE gave away the match on free TV showed a willingness to emphasize more technical bouts, which is good news for wrestling purists. The bad news, however, is that the match was not a huge TV ratings success. The rating for *Smackdown* on the night it was featured was lower than the rating for the previous week. As good a match as it was (and it might well win Match of the Year), it still didn't draw the ratings of a typical Vince McMahon-Stephanie McMahon promo.

WWE business has been in a financial slide for the past three years, and it's no secret that the front office is searching for ways to drive profits up closer to where they were during the boom period of 1997 to 2001. The top feud of that period—and arguably the most successful feud in WWE history—was Vince vs. Steve Austin, a war that was heavy on drama, plot twists, and promos, but light on technical wrestling.

Once again, WWE matchmakers are faced with the big question: What draws more fans—exciting, reversal-filled athletic matches, or grudge matches built around storylines? Obviously, it's some of both, but the way in which matchmakers answer that question will dramatically affect the state of the art of wrestling. There's a very real chance that WWE promoters will try to tone down the fast-paced, athletic matches and build around storylines rather than athleticism (the recent Big Show-Guerrero feud is a good example of this potential trend). If that tactic is successful, other promotions might follow WWE's lead and move toward emphasizing storyline over in-ring work.

One thing is for certain: WWE's treatment of Paul London's TV debut didn't augur well for the fate of technical wrestling in the federation's coming months. The Ring of Honor standout debuted with no fanfare and was utterly destroyed by Lesnar in a brief match. London could have been introduced through a cruiserweight program with Tajiri, Billy Kidman, Ultimo Dragon, or Rey Misterio Jr., but was made to look small and weak against Lesnar instead. Rather than showcase the high-flyers on the mid-card (as TNA has done through the X division), WWE sacrificed one of its top new signees to Lesnar just to make the monster look even more impressive. That decision sent a very clear message: As far as WWE goes, technical skill doesn't necessarily mean that much if you don't have the Herculean physique as well.

Angle and Lesnar may have gotten the green light to do a 60-minute match, but don't expect to see Guerrero, Matt Hardy, Chris Jericho or others

Confrontations between the flamboyant Rico and Stacy Keibler aren't what wrestling purists are interested in seeing. But WWE realizes that not all of its fans are purists. So a lot of what we see on *Raw* and *Smackdown* each week isn't great wrestling. That doesn't mean the state of the art of wrestling is bad.

STATE of the ART

get those same opportunities.

Fortunately, there are options for wrestlers that place a priority on learning moves, countermoves, and mat wrestling. In addition to the X division, TNA featured the always-innovative A.J. Styles as NWA champion for four months in 2003. Styles is one of the top young talents in wrestling, and he's also one of the most influential. Countless independent wrestlers in promotions throughout the United States and Canada see Styles as the man to emulate. He inspires others to improve their mat skills, to continue to develop offensive maneuvers, and to develop strong counter-wrestling techniques.

The same can be said of so many of the competitors of ROH, most of whom are not inordinately large or powerful. These athletes have learned that they must become proficient wrestlers first and foremost and concern themselves with promo skills and other aspects of the game later. If you can't hold your own in the ring with ROH regulars, the fans are going to call you on it, and you're not going to get many more bookings.

To make a name for yourself today—even on the independent circuit—you need more than just a rudimentary knowledge of lockups, armbars, and escapes, or one or two special moves. ROH and other promotions have raised expectations. Much more is expected of today's young wrestlers than in previous years. If you're not blessed

Even A-Train has recognized that submission wrestling is making a strong comeback (below). Same for The Undertaker. Sure, much of his offense is still pure power (right), but he has spent a considerable amount of time studying UFC techniques.

Quite a few fans were encouraged by WWE's signing of independent wunderkind Paul London. They were discouraged about the future prospects of WWE stars his size when they saw how his TV debut was handled, however.

with size, you have to compensate with wrestling skill. If you're lucky enough to have both size and skill, there's no limit to what you can accomplish.

Another encouraging sign of the state of the art today is the proliferation of tape trading on the Internet. Fans with Internet access can trade or buy videos from promotions that cannot afford national TV exposure. That's a good thing for the art of scientific wrestling. Regardless of what direction WWE chooses to take in the immediate future, there is a healthy subculture that appreciates traditional wrestling and competitive matches. That helps wrestling remain relatively stable, despite any travails WWE faces.

Yet another recent trend affecting the state of the art of wrestling is a move toward submission moves as finishers. Submission moves—such as Angle's anklelock and Benoit's crossface—can effectively end a match quickly and with a low element of risk to the attacker. While those holds may lack the electricity of high-risk moves off the top rope, they can help wrestlers avoid injuries and prolong their careers.

In independent promotions as well as WWE, many wrestlers are experimenting, looking for effective submission finishers to call their own. On the indy scene, some enterprising talents sometimes run training sessions prior to shows, often concentrating on the art of submission wrestling. Other wrestlers—including The Undertaker—have taken cues from the Ultimate Fighting Championships and have adapted judo chokes and locks to the pro style. The move toward submission finishers is expected to continue, and is likely to bring more focus onto attacking a particular body part prior to application (such as softening the back with backbreakers, slams, and knees before applying the crossface).

The diversity of styles and influences in the pro ranks today is unprecedented in wrestling history. *Puroresu*, Greco-Roman, and Lucha Libre styles have reached the mainstream, and elements of all of those different styles have been incorporated by wrestlers of all shapes and sizes. Fans expect more from today's wrestlers, and by and large, the wrestlers and promoters are delivering. The art of pro wrestling, we're thrilled to report, is alive and well, even if the business side continues to struggle. □

NWA-TNA continues to push X division competition, and that's good to see. Jerry Lynn and Michael Shane are two of the division's best, and it keeps getting stronger and developing more of an international flavor.

STATE of the BUSINESS

Are the Jarretts ready to challenge the (almost) billionaire in Stamford? No, not until NWA-TNA can turn potential into real profit. But that doesn't mean Vince McMahon isn't worried about that group in Tennessee

Are Jerry Jarrett and everyone else associated with NWA-TNA ready to become a threat to Vince McMahon and WWE? The next year or so will tell us a lot about both companies.

WRESTLING IS A two-company industry again. From a financial perspective, the most fascinating aspect of the blossoming WWE-TNA rivalry is that the two companies are based on very different business models. WWE is truly a multimedia entertainment company with at least a half-billion dollars in assets and several revenue streams, ranging from television programming and pay-per-view, to merchandising and house show tours. NWA-TNA, while trying to make in-roads in all of those areas, is still very dependent upon one revenue stream: its Wednesday night pay-per-views.

So far, that isn't good enough. When Jerry and Jeff Jarrett launched the first TNA pay-per-view in June 2002, their goal for breaking even was 50,000 buys. As it turned out, TNA wasn't available in as many households as originally thought, and the actual number was closer to 20,000. Although buy rate expectations have been lowered in the last 16 months, it quickly became apparent that TNA couldn't survive on the PPV-only business model unless steps were taken to dramatically widen the company's exposure.

Panda Energy was a godsend for TNA. The energy company agreed to come on board as TNA's majority owner, with Jerry and Jeff Jarrett settling for minority shares but retaining day-to-day control. Obviously, TNA could really use a national cable program to hype its pay-per-views. With *Raw* and *Smackdown* offering four hours of free wrestling each week, and basically serving as infomercials for WWE's monthly pay-per-views, TNA needs a similar platform to survive and, perhaps someday, *thrive.*

Wrestling can be a boom-or-bust business, and a company can't hope to just break even (and

there's no indication that TNA is even doing that well yet) for a long time. TNA must grab a bigger piece of the wrestling pie, and the only way to do that is to directly challenge WWE. WCW did that in the mid-1990s, but it also had the support of Ted Turner and his cable networks. How can TNA hope to challenge WWE while having far fewer resources than WCW?

The Jarretts and Panda Energy have decided to challenge WWE in the realm they know best: pay-per-view. They had originally planned to pit Jeff Jarrett against Hulk Hogan in the main event of a special three-hour pay-per-view on November 30. TNA took a cue from WCW by hiring Vince McMahon's most recognizable star of all-time and holding the event on a Sunday, the traditional night for wrestling pay-per-views. TNA's powers-that-be assumed they would need a gigantic wrestling name that would not

The McMahon family thinks is still a big key to turning WWE's fortunes around, especially in storylines (right). That and outrageous feuds like Big Show vs. Eddie Guerrero (below). We'll continue to see if their approach works.

☆★STATE of the BUSINESS★☆

only appeal to hardcore and casual fans, but also catch the attention of cable executives and maybe even other potential investors. The Rock, Steve Austin, and Hogan are the only stars who could fit the bill. Only one of the three was available.

Five weeks before the big event, Hogan told TNA officials that knee surgery would have to postpone his debut. Hogan's match, presumably against Jarrett for the NWA title, would probably have to wait until January 2004. TNA had no choice but to postpone the three-hour pay-per-view as well. Considering Hogan's hefty fee, and the fact that he might be using his TNA appearance as negotiating leverage to secure a bigger payoff for WrestleMania XX, the Jarretts and Panda Energy are taking a major gamble. Hogan is just the hook. TNA's regular performers will have to steal the show.

TNA's bold move begs the question: Is WWE vulnerable? All indications are that WWE hit bottom in early-2003, that its ratings and PPV buy rate freefall stabilized later in the year, and that it is poised for a bit of a recovery in 2004 if the economy improves. *Raw's* weekly cable rating has creeped up from the low-3.0s to near 4.0 on a regular basis. The wild Kane storyline, while often panned by the Internet crowd, has scored inexplicably high numbers. Likewise, *Smackdown's* rating has risen about a half-point to the mid-3.0s.

Eddie Guerrero spraying The Big Show with

Hulk Hogan could be the spark that NWA-TNA needs to help it develop into true competition for WWE. However, "homegrown" stars such as Kid Kash and James Storm (left) and the gorgeous Trinity (below) will need to step up in a big way, too.

sewage scored a higher-than-usual rating, while the Brock Lesnar-Kurt Angle "Ironman" match didn't even keep *Smackdown* on an even keel.

So what does this say about WWE's vulnerability? It seems that viewers are warming up to wrestling a bit again, and shock value can still hot shot its ratings, but there isn't a spark for WWE to gain real momentum. Would a promotional feud with TNA provide that spark? It's possible that WWE doesn't need a competitor to help lead another wrestling boom. If done correctly, a rivalry between the two brands, Raw and Smackdown, could do the trick—and Vince McMahon could rake in the spoils of that war with both hands. Fortunately, WWE has been disciplined enough to resist launching that war too soon.

WWE's overall financial picture is stable, but not particularly impressive. WWE did better than most media and entertainment companies following 9/11 and throughout the recession, yet its numbers have been dismal compared to its previous track record. WrestleMania XIX and SummerSlam, although profitable and praised by the critics, were financial disappointments. WWE posted its first in a series of negative fiscal quarters in 2002, something that hadn't happened since the company went public in 1999. The World nightclub and Smackdown Records were duds. While television ratings have stabilized, other areas, such as live attendance, home video releases, video game licensing deals, and overall merchandising remain stagnant.

But there are bright spots in WWE's future. The brand extension, while not an immediate hit in the early going, has proven to be a modest success. Buy rates were higher than expected for Bad Blood, Raw's first brand-exclusive pay-per-view, and Vengeance, Smackdown's first brand-exclusive PPV. In fact, Vengeance garnered 275,000 buys, hardly a great total, but also not the disaster that some feared it would be.

Like most companies listed on the New York Stock Exchange, WWE is experiencing a higher stock price this year, hovering around $11 per share, which is about $3 higher than the same period in 2002. WWE projected that total profits for 2004 would be between $42.5-million and $47.5-million, a respectable increase. With the exception of WWE Films, the company has concentrated on its core wrestling business and introduced cost-cutting measures that appear to be helping.

Overall, WWE has weathered the recession fairly well, and is on solid enough financial footing to make the most of a potential upturn in 2004. If NWA-TNA's first three-hour PPV is a success, and if Panda Energy can maintain its commitment, WWE might have a serious competitor next year. And, as history has proven, that would be good news for all of wrestling, including WWE. □

It's probably a very good thing that WWE is concentrating more on its wrestling product and less on outside projects. The one major exception, of course, is its investment in the acting career of Triple-H.

STATE of the FUTURE

Bright and sunny or dark and desolate? The outlook for wrestling's future isn't quite that absolute—but there are serious challenges ahead for the sport

When Vince McMahon looks to the future, does he envision wonderful things on the horizon for WWE? We can only hope so. We may have written this before, but it bears repeating yet again: The future of the industry is largely dependent on the actions and vision of this very man.

WITH MOST PRO sports, analysts are able to get a good glimpse into the future by scouting the latest crop of big league prospects on draft day.

But there are no draft days in wrestling, and the next big star could very well be the equivalent of a training camp walk-on—an unheralded grappler from a remote independent promotion, or another sport or profession entirely.

Unpredictability is a fundamental aspect of wrestling. You never know where the next superstar will come from, when he (or she) will appear, or what the future holds in terms of storylines, plot twists, and other surprises.

While it may be impossible to peer into a crystal ball and predict exactly what the future holds, it can be interesting to evaluate trends, up-and-coming talent, and the state of the business, and then hazard an educated guess as to what's on the horizon.

For the third consecutive year, WWE arena attendance, TV ratings, and pay-per-view buys have slipped. Vince McMahon has responded by putting more emphasis on storylines (many directly involving the McMahon family) and slightly de-emphasizing technical wrestling. While this has upset wrestling purists, McMahon has been down this road before, and it has helped him pull the business out of a slump.

Back in 1998, the McMahon-Steve Austin feud helped WWE overtake WCW for good in the Monday night ratings war. That feud happened to be heavy on interviews, backstage skits, and entertainment, but low on technical wrestling action, and it was perhaps the most successful feud in federation history.

It's understandable that McMahon is hoping for lightning to strike twice. The issue is whether or not Vinnie Mac has pushed his evil boss persona as far as it can go, or whether he can once again capture the fans' imagination in a big feud. Unfortunately for WWE, the promotion doesn't have an Austin-level fan favorite to play against McMahon, and even if it did, would the masses want to see him against Vince? Keep in mind that one reason that Austin-McMahon was so successful was that it was a fresh idea, something WWE needed after fruitlessly searching for the next Hulk Hogan for so long.

Meanwhile, a lot of fans have been slow to warm up to Goldberg. While Kurt Angle is Smackdown's most popular star, he has flip-flopped between being a fan favorite and a heel so often that it's hard to say if he can become the ratings savior the promotion so desperately needs.

Again, McMahon has been down this road before, most notably in 1996, following the defection of Nash and Scott Hall to WCW. That created a vacuum that was filled by Michaels, Bret Hart, and Austin, and later Triple-H and The Rock, reinvigorating the title picture. If the past is any indication (and we think it is), we can expect to see some new faces flirting with main event status. Eddie Guerrero, John Cena, Randy Orton, Chris Benoit, and perhaps even Chris Jericho might just get chances at the top of the card. Sooner or later, WWE has to sink or swim with some or all of these stars, just as it had to gamble in 1996. There are also many who believe that WWE needs to discover new concepts and present a somewhat new approach to wrestling in the near future.

But even if a wrestler from the mid-card ranks jumps into the main event picture, things aren't going to change overnight. The Undertaker will likely remain a fixture in the Smackdown title hunt, while Triple-H is a lock to remain at—or at least very close to—the top of Raw cards.

With WrestleMania XX looming, there's little doubt that McMahon will look to shake things up by bringing back some names from the past. Bret Hart is a strong possibility, as are Bobby Heenan, Hulk Hogan, and many other notable 'Mania veterans. Few such stars could offer much beyond a one-show surprise appearance, as even the "Hitman" made it crystal-clear when Kurt Angle suggested a match between the two that his health will not allow him to ever compete again.

Ironically, perhaps the biggest X factor in predicting wrestling's *immediate* future is the man who headlined WrestleMania I—Hogan.

Hulk Hogan is again a key player in the wrestling business. He could give WWE another short-term boost by the time WrestleMania XX rolls around—and perhaps delay WWE's implementation of a long-term plan at the same time. Or he could *really* boost TNA.

Following his win over Masa Chono on October 13 at the Tokyo Dome, Hogan was attacked by Jeff Jarrett, who smashed a guitar over Hogan's head. Prior to the attack, Hogan had announced he wanted to win the IWGP title (which he held in the early-1980s) and the NWA title. An NWA-TNA bout between Hogan and Jarrett had been scheduled for November 30, but that had to be put off when Hogan opted for knee surgery.

Clearly, Hogan is the biggest financial investment TNA has made in its 18-month history, but Hogan is—or was—the biggest draw in wrestling history. The question is whether his involvement will interest both fans and investors and thus expose TNA to a larger audience.

☆★STATE of the FUTURE★☆

Hogan could also eventually be placed in programs with other TNA stars, which can help elevate the likes of A.J. Styles, Shane Douglas, Raven, and America's Most Wanted to a new level.

There has been some speculation that if Hogan's eventual appearance is a success, TNA could push forward and find a cable-TV home for a free weekly TV show. While TNA will never have anywhere near the financial resources that WCW had, a challenge by TNA would force WWE to respond. Don't expect another version of the Monday night wars of the late-1990s, but expect WWE management and talent to tune in and see what the other guys are doing, and then try to ratchet things up and outshine them.

Wrestling as a whole can only benefit from that type of competitive situation. Not only would dueling national TV shows force both promotions to react to one another, but if TNA proves profitable, it could weaken WWE's monopoly on the business and provide an alternative workplace for a lot more wrestlers.

And then there's the independent scene, which is facing challenges of its own. Perhaps somewhat due to the furor over backyard wrestling as a cottage industry, some states have been strictly enforcing licensing and insurance

Remember when Chris Jericho got the opportunity of a lifetime—as the undisputed WWE World champion (left)? It wasn't as great an opportunity as he expected it to be. Soon enough, WWE started relying on more proven headliners. Most experts agree John Cena (above) has the best chance to be WWE's latest breakout star—if he is given a *real* chance.

The next year will be crucial for NWA-TNA. If a lot of things go right, a number of WWE wrestlers might, like Raven, find the company to be an increasingly attractive alternative place of employment. WWE might actually worry about losing talent to TNA.

regulations, often making it cost-prohibitive for smaller promotions to run shows. This has made it more difficult for a lot of indy wrestlers to find work and forced many to travel longer distances between small shows.

The silver lining in this situation has been that it has helped wrestlers breaking into the business network, and word of mouth has helped open the doors to some to the larger indy feds.

As you probably read in "State Of International" on page 46, the Japanese wrestling scene as a whole continues to struggle. Bob Sapp is considered by many to be a major part of the future of Japanese wrestling, and may well become a major player here in the States someday. New Japan is continuing its dabblings into mixed martial arts, with mixed success at best. Like their counterparts in the U.S. wrestling scene, *puroresu* promoters are struggling to find that next big concept to lift business out of the doldrums. So far, neither has latched on to it.

As 2003 draws to a close, the state of the future of wrestling is much like the state of the present. WWE continues to be profitable, but at nowhere near the levels as it was a few years ago. Austin and The Rock are no longer around to be the ratings saviors, and the promotion is trying to decide where to turn for the long term. WWE business—and its in-ring product—is stabilizing, if not spectacular, and unless someone like Angle, Goldberg, or Jericho can break through to the level of Rock and Austin, it should continue to be so in the future. NWA-TNA's gambit may be the boldest move in the business right now, and it could send shockwaves through the industry. However, if Hogan fails, that could destroy TNA and strengthen McMahon's stranglehold on the industry.

In short, it's a very interesting time to be a wrestling fan, and a frightening time to be a wrestler. □

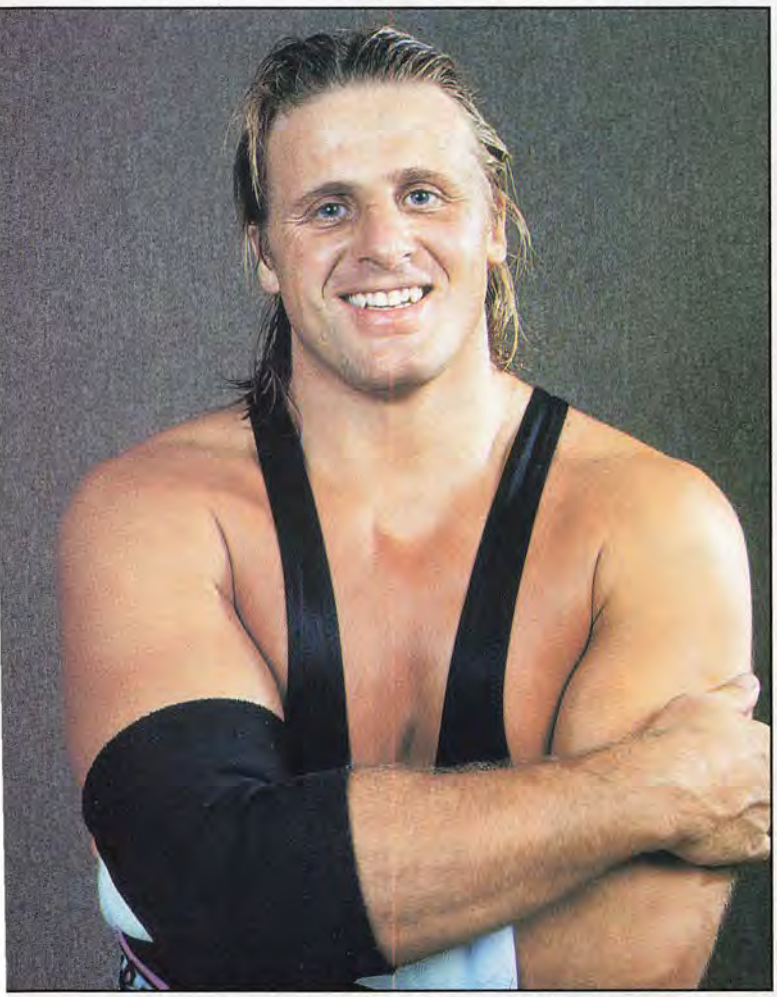
Don't discount the possibility of someone like Bob Sapp, a very charismatic wrestler/shoot-fighter who plies his trade in Japan for now, making a major impact in the U.S. in the next few years.

the business page

By Harry Burkett

Bound for February? NWA-TNA officials were thrilled when they were able to reach an agreement with Hulk Hogan for their first attempt at a three-hour, Sunday night pay-per-view. Indeed, plans were already underway to hold the event on November 30. The fact that TNA aired footage of Jeff Jarrett attacking Hulk Hogan in Japan made it seem that Bound For Glory was definitely going to happen.

But Hogan, who was experiencing knee problems in Japan, was informed that he would need immediate knee surgery, which he reportedly underwent on October 30. In an exclusive interview, Jeff Jarrett told *PWI* just before press time that Bound For Glory would most likely be held in February and that Hogan would be part of the package. So, for now it looks as if Hogan's revenge will have to wait.



Finally, after four-plus long years, it appears all the legal wrangling over the tragic death of Owen Hart at a pay-per-view has ended with a settlement between WWE and Lewmar Inc.

TNA officials regard the postponement as a mixed blessing because, while it was difficult to move back the event because the date had been set with cable operators, it will give the promotion more time to build toward the PPV. TNA's storylines are already moving toward Jarrett defending the NWA title against Hogan at Bound For Glory. Most recently, Jarrett attacked Hogan's long-time confidant Jimmy Hart on one of TNA's weekly pay-per-views.

For more of Jarrett's comments regarding Bound For Glory and the state of TNA in general, check out our special one-hour "Q & A" interview with the NWA champion in the March 2004 issue of *The Wrestler,* hitting newsstands on or about December 30.

Courtroom closure. More than four years after Owen Hart's fatal fall at a WWE pay-per-view, the legal issues related to his death might have finally reached a conclusion. According to the *Stamford* (Connecticut) *Advocate,* Lewmar Inc.—the manufacturer of the stunt harness worn by Hart on the night of his death—agreed to pay WWE $9-million as part of an out-of-court settlement. WWE also gained restitution for legal fees, which brought the total settlement to $13-million.

Considering that Martha Hart, Owen's widow, had successfully sued WWE for $18-million in a wrongful death lawsuit, WWE and Lewmar agreed that the only equitable arrangement would be for both sides to pay half that amount. WWE had always contended that Martha should have targeted Lewmar instead. It is believed that most, if not all, of the $13-million that Lewmar paid WWE was covered by liability insurance.

WWE presents funds to fallen soldiers. Shawn Michaels must have been delighted to attend a check presentation at Chicago's Stratford Square Mall on September 29. After all, it was "The Heartbreak Kid" who gave WWE CEO Linda McMahon the idea to raise funds for the families of soldiers killed in Iraq. WWE raised the funds through the sale of special WrestleMania XX posters at participating FYE stores.

Interestingly, the "WrestleMania XX Benefit For Armed Forces Families" was a brand-exclusive charity drive. Raw superstars often appeared at FYE stores to sign the commemorative posters.

Michaels, who grew up in a military family, was proud of the effort.

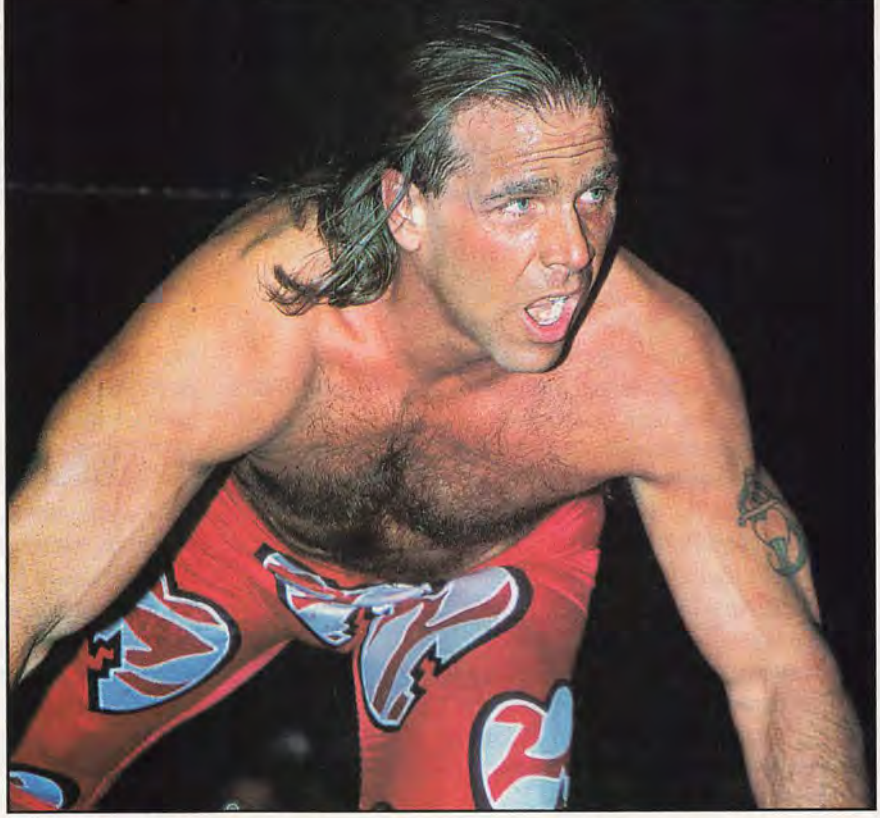
"The families of our Armed Forces are the unsung heroes of America," he stated. "This money will provide meaningful assistance to these families who have suffered the greatest sacrifice one can make for their country: the loss of a loved one."

WWE Raw champion Bill Goldberg, Trish Stratus, The Hurricane, Rosey, Maven, and FYE District Manager Doug Cerise were also on hand for the check presentation to Tom Ripley of the Marine Corps Law Enforcement Foundation. Even some members of the Marine Corps wrestling team were in attendance.

Shy of the spotlight?! Only a few weeks before Stephanie McMahon took a hiatus from Smackdown due to her wedding to Triple-H on October 25, the former general manager and current WWE Creative head depicted herself as a reluctant participant in WWE storylines. As hard as it is to believe, Stephanie noted that she often becomes jittery prior to appearing in public and that her "I Quit" match at No Mercy with her father, Vince, would be especially difficult.

"Certainly, there's a lot of pressure," Stephanie told the *Fredericksburg* (Virginia) *Free Lance-Star*. "Neither one of us are quote-unquote wrestlers. It's going to be challenging physically." She later added, "I'm always really nervous. But before I go out to do this with my dad, it's going to be unbelievable how nervous I get."

"The Billion-Dollar Princess" admitted that her father acted like a bombastic jerk on television, but was the exact opposite at home. Stephanie described him as "one of the most loving, caring individuals" she had ever met, and addressed the issue of whether the McMahons were overexposed on television. She shot down the contention that the McMahons were making themselves on-air characters in order to offset the losses of genuine superstars such as The Rock and Hulk Hogan. According to Steph, her family simply can't resist participating. She also noted that she didn't mind being called a "slut" at WWE events.



Since he grew up in a military family, Shawn Michaels can sympathize with those with loved ones in the Armed Forces. He suggested to WWE CEO Linda McMahon that the company help some of the families of soldiers who died in Iraq, and WWE came through.

WWE Stockwatch

(For the period of September 16 to October 15, 2003)

30-Day High: 11.00 on October 14
30-Day Low: 9.95 on September 24
52-Week High: 11.07 on June 26 and 27, 2003
52-Week Low: 6.76 on October 16, 2002

Madison Square Garden and TicketMaster made WrestleMania XX tickets available at 10 a.m. on September 27 ... and the event was sold out within mere minutes. More than 1,000 fans gathered at the MSG box office that morning, and thousands more purchased tickets via the Internet. Ticket prices ranged from $54.50 for general admission to $754.50 for ringside seats, but, of course, those include a commemorative WrestleMania XX chair.

Spectators from 35 states and 16 countries are expected to attend the 20th anniversary of WWE's biggest event. WrestleMania will be available by pay-per-view in a total of 90 countries. The pre-WrestleMania XX hype probably explains why Vince McMahon, following in his father's footsteps, was inducted into the Madison Square Garden Hall of Fame.

Also worthy of note, WWE has made astounding progress in the international market, reaching more television deals in Mexico, Ecuador, Chile, Bolivia, Malaysia, Japan, Italy, Australia, New Zealand, and the Middle East.

And, finally, WWE's Board of Directors approved a four-cent dividend on all Class A and Class B common shares at its September 19 meeting. The record date for the dividend was September 30 and the payment date was October 10.

TV breakdown

Week beginning September 15

Raw (Spike TV): 3.7
Smackdown (UPN): 3.2
Velocity (Spike TV): 0.7
Confidential (Spike TV): 0.5
Sunday Night Heat (Spike TV): 1.0

Analysis: Vince McMahon continued to infuriate a lot of WWE's core fans by giving them what they didn't want: a *Raw* full of outrageous gimmickry, including the Kane-Shane McMahon war, Rosey the superhero in training, Randy Orton giving 80-year-old Fabulous Moolah the RKO, and Jerry Lawler defeating Al Snow in the main event. Yet he provided the opposite on *Smackdown:* the excellent Brock Lesnar-Kurt Angle "Ironman" match. *Sunday Night Heat* did not receive a boost as the Unforgiven pre-show, scoring a typical 1.0.

Week beginning September 22

Raw (Spike TV): 3.6
Smackdown (UPN): 3.1
Velocity (Spike TV): 0.6
Confidential (Spike TV): 0.5
Sunday Night Heat (Spike TV): 1.1

Analysis: New WWE Raw champion Bill Goldberg got sweet vengeance over long-time rival Chris Jericho with a main event victory, and Jonathan Coachman and Al Snow served as hosts, resulting from their win over Jerry Lawler and Jim Ross at Unforgiven. Tajiri pinned Rey Misterio Jr. for the cruiserweight title in a superb 15-minute match on *Smackdown.* Later, Vince and Stephanie McMahon launched their bizarre father-daughter feud. *Confidential* continued to stink, er, sink with a dismal 0.5 rating.

Week beginning September 29

Raw (Spike TV): 3.5
Smackdown (UPN): 2.9
Velocity (Spike TV): 0.6
Confidential (Spike TV): 0.5
Sunday Night Heat (Spike TV): 1.0

Analysis: Rob Van Dam beat Christian in a fabulous ladder match to capture another Intercontinental championship. Jim Ross used a stunner beat Jonathan Coachman in a country whipping match to regain the announcers' table for himself and Jerry Lawler. John Cena and WWE Smackdown champion Brock Lesnar beat Kurt Angle and The Undertaker in *Smackdown's* main event. *Smackdown's* rating dropped to a scary 2.9 because of tough competition from the new fall television lineup. But it would bounce back.

Week beginning October 6

Raw (Spike TV): 3.5
Smackdown (UPN): 3.9
Velocity (Spike TV): 0.7
Confidential (Spike TV): 0.5
Sunday Night Heat (Spike TV): 1.0

Analysis: The Kane-Shane McMahon storyline had been boosting ratings for its own quarter-hours, but didn't provide an overarching theme to help other segments. This week, *Raw's* rating was 3.5, a drop from 4.2 only six weeks earlier. *Smackdown* rebounded by an entire point, but Paul London might be sad to find out that his match against Brock Lesnar wasn't necessarily responsible for it. Eddie Guerrero spraying The Big Show with raw—sorry, *Smackdown*—sewage hot-shotted the overall rating.

Week beginning October 13

Raw (Spike TV): 3.6
Smackdown (UPN): 3.3
Velocity (Spike TV): 0.6
Confidential (Spike TV): 0.6
Sunday Night Heat (Spike TV): 0.9

Analysis: *Raw* offered a five-man handicap match for the main event, pitting Raw champ Bill Goldberg and Shawn Michaels against Ric Flair, Randy Orton, and Mark Henry. Michaels intentionally superkicked Goldberg as payback for a Goldberg misstep the previous week. Rey Misterio Jr. vs. Johnny Stamboli wasn't the main event of *Smackdown,* just the final match. An impromptu biker chain brawl erupted between The Undertaker and Smackdown champ Brock Lesnar to close out the program.

Week beginning October 20

Raw (Spike TV): 3.7
Smackdown (UPN): 3.6
Velocity (Spike TV): 0.7
Confidential (Spike TV): 0.6
Sunday Night Heat (Spike TV): 0.5

Analysis: Although Raw champion Bill Goldberg was preoccupied with his opponent, Shawn Michaels, in the main event, he found out who his real enemies were when a returning Batista jumped into the ring, attacked Michaels, and injured Goldberg's ankle with a steel chair. Batista collected $100,000 and returned to Evolution. The Basham Brothers upset Los Guerreros for the Smackdown tag team title, and The Undertaker beat Smackdown champ Brock Lesnar and The Big Show by in the handicap main event despite the maneuverings of new Smackdown GM Paul Heyman.

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the steel cage

By Liz Hunter

WHAT VINCE WANTS. For years, there's been a common belief that in spite of what he says, Vince McMahon doesn't always care about giving fans what they want. These people insist that there are times when Vince uses WWE to amuse himself primarily, and the general audience secondarily. WWE is a microcosm of Vince's personal likes and dislikes, his humor and fetishes. If Vince could create his own world, WWE would be it. And that can be a scary place, indeed.

This is why the NWA had Rick Steamboat and WWE had a pig farmer named Uncle Elmer. This is why "Dirty White Boy" Tony Anthony became plumber T.L. Hopper in Vince's WWE. This is why Hulk Hogan wrestled Sid Justice (Vicious), and not Ric Flair, at WrestleMania VIII. This is also the mentality that gave us the bizarre Goldust, a topless Mae Young, HLA, Katie Vick, and necrophilia.

When Vince told Stephanie that he would "strike down the face of defiance," that revealed a lot about his real-life personality. Perhaps he's obsessed with wearing down defiant wrestling fans and converting them to his vision of sports entertainment.

This is why Kane jump-started Shane McMahon's grapefruits on *Raw*. This is why Triple-H remained the Raw champ for a year while Rob Van Dam was on the mid-card. This is why Eric Bischoff is a spineless general manager, and not a threat to Vince.

For a few weeks here and there, *Smackdown* was a refuge from these antics. Storylines revolving around Brock Lesnar, Kurt Angle, and the cruiserweight division emphasized athleticism over vulgarity. *Smackdown's* overall quality improved as a result. So what happened? Vince dismissed Paul Heyman as head of the Smackdown creative team. And how did WWE capitalize on the momentum of the remarkable Lesnar-Angle "Ironman" match?

Hmmmmmm. Let's see. One episode in particular featured Sable kicking Linda McMahon in the stomach, Vince clotheslining his daughter, Kurt Angle and John Cena squaring off in a lame "battle rap," and Eddie Guerrero spraying The Big Show with raw sewage.

Sewage? I haven't been able to find a single soul who enjoyed that spectacle—not a reader of *PWI,* no one in this office, and no one on the Internet. Obviously, there's a certain multimillionaire in Stamford who must appreciate that kind of bathroom humor.

When Vince McMahon isn't at war with his daughter on *Smackdown* these days, he's nuzzling up to the lovely Sable. Liz Hunter is starting to believe that the WWE chairman really is making WWE programs his own personal playground.

NO GOLD RUSH YET. Bill Goldberg may be the WWE Raw champion, but I don't feel the rush yet. His march to the Raw title pales in comparison to his rise through the ranks of WCW. Goldberg is wearing the same belt (or at least a reasonable facsimile) and remains a fan favorite, yet it has fallen just a bit flat so far. In 1997 and 1998, his undefeated streak was exciting because no one—not Goldberg, not WCW, and not the fans—knew where it would lead.

After Goldberg defeated Hulk Hogan for the WCW World belt, Harry Burkett wrote a story for the December 1998 issue of *PWI* titled "Gold Rush! Get Ready For The Most Awesome WCW Title Reign Ever!" This

excerpt described the Goldberg phenomenon.

Expectations for Goldberg have multiplied twentyfold with his title victory. The dramatic ascension of Goldberg in only 10 months, the enormous ovations he has received at WCW arenas (often hours before he makes his appearance), and his clear-cut triumph for the championship have set an incredible standard for his title reign ... Did you think Goldberg was awesome ***before*** *his World title victory? You haven't seen anything yet!*

Although Jerry Lynn didn't beat Michael Shane for the NWA-TNA X title on October 1, he easily could have. Out of nowhere, though, TNA broadcasters made Lynn's age (40) an issue during that match. It was peculiar given that Lynn has never looked better in the ring.

Goldberg's five-month reign was impressive, but failed to deliver on Harry's promise. His reign was not quite as awesome as his pursuit of the title. There were two questions that dogged Goldberg as his undefeated streak gained attention. Could he become a main-eventer? Also, could he win a world title? Both of those questions have been answered.

Now WWE has to come up with a new set of questions.

AGE IS JUST A NUMBER. Exactly three years after winning the ECW World heavyweight title, Jerry Lynn found himself on NWA-TNA's October 1 pay-per-view in a match for Michael Shane's X championship. For whatever reason, Don West and Mike Tenay were preoccupied with Lynn's age as he battled an opponent who was 16 years younger. They speculated on whether Lynn would retire in the near future.

I don't know about West and Tenay, but I didn't see where Lynn—who turned 40 on June 12—missed a step during that title match. After 15 years in the business, Lynn is at his peak right now, with the perfect blend of experience and physical ability.

Yes, Lynn did lose that match to Shane. But, for the record, Chris Sabin knocked Lynn off the turnbuckles, allowing Shane to superkick him and get the three-count. I'm surprised that West and Tenay didn't suggest Lynn's peripheral vision was failing in his advancing years. For their information, he has *always* been nearsighted!

The following week, 57-year-old Dusty Rhodes wrestled NWA champion A.J. Styles in a match that went 15 minutes. By those standards, shouldn't Lynn be considered a "young lion"? West and Tenay were mum on the subject. □

strange list of the month

FIVE QUOTES VINCE McMAHON HAS ADDED TO THE WRESTLING LEXICON

1. "I will strike down the face of defiance!"
2. "Bret Hart screwed Bret Hart."
3. "There's only one way to beat a billionaire. Become one yourself!"
4. "I want you to show some ruthless aggression!"
5. "I will take that proviso under advisement."

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win, lose, or draw

By Harry Burkett

JUST BECAUSE YOU like music doesn't mean you like Britney Spears. Just because you like television doesn't mean you like *Friends*. Just because you like wrestling doesn't mean you like WWE or NWA-TNA. Wrestling fans are a very diverse group of people, with an infinite range of tastes and temperaments. Indeed, there are niche audiences in wrestling, from those who favor hardcore and T & A, to those who are loyal to *puroresu* and Lucha Libre.

High-flying Qenaan Creed became the first Urban Empire Wrestling champion at the first event in UEW history in Philadelphia in October. While the turnout for the event, geared to an urban crowd, was disappointing, Harry Burkett applauds the effort to appeal to a niche market.

I've often wondered why fledgling promotions don't try harder to appeal to niche audiences. Ring of Honor has done this successfully, appealing to a serious group of fans who appreciate athleticism and sportsmanship. The best way to encourage loyalty is by offering a product that fans can't get anywhere else. That accounts for the wide array of license plates that can be seen in the parking lot at any Ring of Honor event, and why ROH videotapes are in demand all over the country.

Likewise, I've always believed there was a market for an urban-themed wrestling promotion that appeals to fans of rap, hip-hop, and the urban lifestyle. Forget the fancy logos, just spray-paint the promotion's name on the ring apron. For a creative promoter willing to push the limits of political correctness, this is a niche audience waiting to be tapped. Urban music, fashion, and slang already appeal to people of all ethnic backgrounds, both in the inner city and outer suburbia. Wouldn't these same people appreciate a new brand of street-tough wrestling?

The Urban Wrestling Alliance attempted this, and almost gained a contract with Black Entertainment Television a few years ago. Orlando Jordan, Qenaan Creed, and Koko B. Ware were among the most prominent wrestlers involved with the UWA. Despite a significant investment initially, and a series of television tapings, that promotion never took off.

On October 4, Urban Empire Wrestling debuted at the Blue Horizon, a legendary facility located in the heart of Philadelphia that has hosted many a great boxing card over the years. UEW ran commercials on local hip-hop radio stations in the weeks leading up to the event in order to try to reach its target audience. While UEW marketed primarily to the urban crowd, it also tried to reach wrestling fans

who were fed up with sports entertainment, campy backstage vignettes, and unrealistic storylines. With its slogan, "Wrestling Doesn't Get Any Realer Than This," UEW tried to convey a gritty, no-nonsense image.

At its inaugural show, "The Legacy Begins," UEW set the tone with its opening bout, an eight-man tag team match featuring stars of CHIKARA, a Pennsylvania-based promotion that emphasizes mat grappling with a Japanese/Mexican flair. Mike Quackenbush, Gran Akuma, Icarus, and UltraMantis defeated The Wild Cards and The Conundrum. There was plenty of style to go with the substance, as local radio personalities kept the beat pumping. Shelliano the Mobstah won a "freestyle MC battle" competition, out-rapping every wrestler in the building.

Yet the event really came down to the wrestling. In qualifying matches for the UEW heavyweight title competition, Qenaan Creed defeated 2-Dope, Julio Dinero beat Mike Quackenbush, Sonny Siaki defeated Xavier, and Ruckus beat Sonjay Dutt. The winners battled each other in a four-way elimination bout. After Dinero and Ruckus were eliminated, the two survivors—Creed and Siaki—faced each other in a standing 10-count match for the vacant Urban Empire championship. Creed won that violent match to claim the title.

Was the UEW experiment successful? While the wrestling was good and the presentation original, there was a low turnout. Either the promotion had trouble connecting with its target audience, which is possible considering all the entertainment options in a city like Philadelphia, or wrestling has alienated the urban demographic to the point that it didn't give UEW a chance.

UEW President Marcus Jordan, formerly a wrestler in Maryland Championship Wrestling, hopes that word of mouth will increase attendance for future efforts. "The turnout might have been low for our first time, but the show was pay-per-view-quality," he said. "The people missed one hell of a show. We really bonded with that crowd. Afterward, all the wrestlers agreed that it was an amazing event."

Even if UEW isn't the organization that will ultimately reach the urban market, I'm confident that a promotion will eventually do so in the future. Then the possibilities are limitless. Why can't there be a promotion devoted to the Southern market? Just as UEW has blended hip-hop and wrestling, another promoter could blend country music and wrestling. WCW was long derided as a "Southern rasslin' promotion," and that was because it had an extemely strong base in that part of the country. Whether Vince McMahon likes it or not, there are plenty of ex-fans who will never appreciate WWE's brand of sports entertainment, even though WCW and the old NWA territories are long extinct.

If anyone is ever going to really try to go totally Southern with a niche promotion, why not try to get Tracey Smothers and his old Confederate flag involved? Where Sherri Martel would fit into the mix wouldn't be so clear, however.

Or an enterprising rasslin' promoter could play right into the Southern stereotype. I always thought Dusty Rhodes should have changed the name of his Turnbuckle Championship Wrestling promotion to *Trailer* Championship Wrestling and gone completely redneck. Imagine all of the co-promotional opportunities with NASCAR. Think about it: Jeff Foxworthy as a ring announcer, a Lynyrd Skynyrd entrance theme for each wrestler, and maybe Dusty could have brought back his old Great American Bash buddy David Allan Coe to perform during intermission.

Since Dusty never went that route, maybe an investor could pour some money into Kentucky-based Old School Wrestling. At a show a couple of years ago, OSW champion Bad Boy Phillips went to the ring, ripped off his tear-away pants to reveal Confederate flag boxer shorts, and shook his rear to Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama." Should that qualify as entertainment? No. Was it entertaining? Yes.

Old School Wrestling could take it to the next level by rounding out the roster with Southern favorites such as The Rock 'n' Roll Express, Tracey Smothers, Tim Horner, and a handful of Armstrongs. Instead of a freestyle MC battle, there could be a freestyle "horn-yakker" battle, to borrow a term from Vince Russo. Could Tommy Rich beat Buddy Landell? Tough call.

Okay, maybe not all of these are good ideas. But you get my point. If there are so many varieties of music, television, and movies, why can't pro wrestling offer a few more choices? □

the straight shooter

By Dan Murphy

DOES JEFF JARRETT vs. Hulk Hogan for the NWA title qualify as a dream match?

It doesn't in my book, but it must to the folks behind the scenes at NWA-TNA. Word coming out of Nashville this fall was that Hogan vs. Jarrett would headline a three-hour TNA pay-per-view supercard, most likely early in 2004.

Now before any of this takes place, a few things probably need to happen, and there's a pretty decent chance they will have happened by the time you read this. First of all, Jarrett has to win the NWA title from A.J. Styles, a heck of a challenge in and of itself. In my opinion, Styles is the top dog in TNA and should remain that promotion's franchise player. Since winning the title, Styles has done nothing but improve; he's developed into a world-class talent.

Then, of course, there's the little matter of getting Hogan's John Hancock on the dotted line. Given that Hogan talked at a press conference in Japan after beating Masa Chono on October 13 about wanting to win the NWA title, and then was promptly attacked by a guitar-wielding Jarrett, I'm assuming that won't be a huge problem. But Hogan is likely to command the biggest payday in TNA's 18-month history, and that's just for one match and maybe a few appearances to hype the one match. If TNA wanted to lock Hogan up for a lengthy run and milk the cash cow for all he's worth, it would take a major financial investment—one that the TNA powerbrokers might not be able to afford.

There are still some "i's" that need to be dotted and "t's" that need to be crossed before Hogan-Jarrett is a done deal, and I think someone has to throw some cold water on this little flash pot before it's too late.

Let me ask one important question: What does NWA-TNA have to gain by betting the farm on Hogan-Jarrett?

Okay, easy answer. Most likely, the PPV-based promotion is hoping Hogan's name draws some national exposure for TNA and pops a buy rate as more casual fans tune in to see the "Hulkster." Maybe this will lead to a cable-TV deal. The TNA folks are probably also hoping hardcore fans remember the 2000 Bash at the Beach controversy in which Jarrett and Hogan were scheduled to face off and Vince Russo publicly "fired" Hogan in the center of the ring. On paper, this could be one of the most talked-about matches of the year.

The problem with looking at things "on paper" is that you're only seeing two dimensions—you can't always see the big picture.

I have no problem with Jeff Jarrett. He's an intelligent, articulate, and genuine person. I think he's a great ambassador for pro wrestling and a strong front man for NWA-TNA. I also think Jarrett is a talented in-ring competitor.

But—and I know others on the *PWI* staff will disagree with me—Jeff Jarrett is not a main-eventer. He may have won a handful of WCW World titles in the dying days of that promotion, but he largely was a champion by default. Sting, Hogan, Lex Luger, Goldberg, and Kevin Nash were all either nursing injuries or working part-time. Jarrett made the most of a bad situation, but he was never accepted by fans as a credible heavyweight champion.

Jeff Jarrett hopes he and NWA-TNA can hit a home run by bringing in Hulk Hogan for a match with him in early 2004. Dan Murphy thinks using Hogan in TNA is a good idea, just not in a match with Jarrett.

Hogan is obviously eager to redeem himself after the way his last run with WWE—as Mr. America—ended. Whether or not TNA is the right promotion for him to do that remains to be seen.

As far as TNA goes, as long as Jeff and his father, Jerry, are involved in running the business, Jeff will be plagued by the charge of nepotism. He would best serve the company as a solid mid-card competitor, standing on the periphery of the main event.

Jarrett vs. Hogan just isn't that intriguing of a match, even with the Russo factor. Hogan is now a good 15 years past his prime, and he struggled in recent WWE matches against Vince McMahon, Big Show, Brock Lesnar, and Undertaker (though, in all fairness, his win over Chono, number 46 in the "*PWI* 500," is a noteworthy accomplishment). Even the biggest "Hulkamaniac" would have to concede that Hogan is very, very limited as a wrestler today. If Jarrett was to beat Hogan, it might be a mild upset, but it wouldn't do much to give Jarrett that credibility he covets. If Jarrett pinned Hogan cleanly 10 years ago, it might have made him look like Superman. Now it just shows how far Hogan has fallen.

If Hogan was to win, it would reinforce the perception of Jarrett being a second-tier competitor, and that would make TNA look like a second-class promotion to any curious first-time fans who tuned in just to see Hogan. To the public at large, Hogan is a has-been. He still has drawing power, but only as a nostalgia act. Just like when Russo brought in Jay Leno, Dennis Rodman, and David Arquette for guest spots in WCW, any publicity Hogan's name gives TNA could be eclipsed by the negative publicity of Hogan beating Jarrett and making TNA look like a poor man's WWE.

All that being said, I don't necessarily think it's a bad idea to bring Hogan in for a big money match or two. I just think matching him up against Jarrett is a recipe for disaster. A win doesn't help either man, and the match itself is lacking in drama. But there are some other opponents that could bring the goods against Hogan.

First, why not pit Hogan against Styles? Styles is still young and a lot less known than Jarrett, who has been on the national scene for a decade. If Styles was to score a clean pinfall over Hogan, it would be a major career boost for him. Just imagine the bragging rights the NWA people would have if they could say their champion once refused a WWE contract (which Styles did) and then pinned the legendary Hogan one-two-three in the middle of the ring! Because he's so young, Styles could also bounce back from a loss against Hogan and maybe take the "Hulkster" in a rematch. Those are intriguing scenarios.

And what about Raven? Raven has never wrestled Hogan one-on-one. Whereas Hogan embodies old school WWF power wrestling, Raven represents hardcore, do-whatever-it-takes-to-win streetfighting. Raven could wrest the best match out of Hogan in years. He could torment Hogan and promise to punish the icon for ducking him for so many years. The opportunities are limitless.

And then there's Dusty Rhodes. Hogan was the WWF's most popular wrestler throughout the 1980s, while Dusty was the most popular wrestler in the NWA during the same period. For the first time ever, Big Dust and the "Hulkster" could mix it up. True, it wouldn't be as fast and furious as a typical X division match (or an atypical one, for what that's worth), but it certainly would be interesting.

NWA-TNA is on the verge of the biggest event in company history. Let's hope the promotion doesn't blow it. □

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THE Wrestling ANALYST

REY MISTERIO JR.

Years Pro: 12
Size: 5'3", 163
"*PWI* 500" Listings: 2002—19
2001—58
2000—Not listed
1999—4
1998—107
1997—29
1996—7
1995—18
1994—101
Titles: WWE cruiserweight
WWE Smackdown tag team
WCW World tag team (3 times)
WCW cruiserweight (5 times)
WCW cruiserweight tag team
Mexican National welterweight
Mexican National trios
WWA welterweight (3 times)
WWA lightweight (3 times)
WWA tag team
AAA IWAS tag team
***PWI* Awards:** Inspirational Wrestler of the Year:
3rd runner-up (1996)
Match of the Year:
1st runner-up (1997)
3rd runner-up (1995, 2002)

[[the numbers]]

Offense (10.0): Often matched against men twice his size in WCW, Misterio learned how to catapult off the ropes or climb to the top turnbuckle for almost every move in his repertoire. He still employs that style on Smackdown cards, even though his cruiserweight opponents are usually about the same size. Yet Misterio's timing is superior to anyone else's.

Defense (8.5): Misterio easily counters his less-experienced opponents on the Smackdown roster because he's even quicker mentally than he is physically. They foolishly try to beat Misterio at his own game. Dean Malenko was sometimes successful in using his technical, mat-based offense to ground Misterio in WCW. Ultimo Dragon and others have failed to do that in WWE.

Experience (10.0): He established himself as a premier star in Mexico before moving to the U.S. and gaining prominence in ECW. From there, he signed with WCW and became the centerpiece of the cruiserweight division, which, along with the NWO, helped *Nitro* overtake *Raw* in the Monday night ratings wars. He has been an impact player for close to a decade now.

Conditioning (9.0): This is Misterio's most significant area of improvement since he was last profiled in the July 1998 issue of *The Wrestling Analyst*. Back in '98, we advised the 140-pounder to bulk up to at least 160. He's done that. Also, the average wrestler weighs a lot less today, and that has made Misterio very competitive, not just a novelty act.

Science (8.5): Sooner or later, Misterio's knees and ankles will make it impossible to continue at his current tempo. In fact, he has already undergone several knee surgeries. He will have to follow the example of other veteran Luchadors, such as Konnan, who added holds such as the tequila sunrise to his repertoire, and his uncle, Rey Misterio Sr., who has become a master of the German suplex.

Stamina (9.5): Although Misterio will turn 30 in 2004, there's no reason to believe his endurance is waning. It would probably take at least a half-hour to push him to exhaustion, but he would have to downgrade his huracanranas to tropical storms after about 15 to 20 minutes. His lack of catch-as-catch-can mat skills might be exposed at that point.

Power (6.0): Between WCW's demise in 2001, and his WWE debut the following year, Misterio spent quite a bit of time on the sidelines recovering from knee problems. But he put that down time to good use, hitting the gym and working on his upper-body development. That has made him very effective against stars such as Jamie Noble and cruiserweight champion Tajiri.

Speed (10.0): Doesn't Misterio personify speed in pro wrestling? It's a grand illusion. Sure, Misterio is quick, but he won't win many footraces with his beat-up ankles, which were causing him pain as early as his ECW years. Misterio's superior attributes are balance, technique, and timing, which combine to make him very agile.

Ability To Absorb Punishment (8.0): When WCW routinely mismatched Misterio against larger foes, he often fell prey to high-impact maneuvers such as powerslams and power bombs. Misterio is also prone to submission holds because he doesn't have the height or reach to counter them. Kurt Angle proved that at SummerSlam 2002, when he beat him cleanly with an anklelock.

Quality Of Opposition (9.0): Tajiri, Ultimo Dragon, Matt Hardy, Shannon Moore, Billy Kidman, Jamie Noble, Nunzio, Spanky, Zach Gowen, and others comprise arguably the most formidable cruiserweight roster in history. But it won't be until WWE emphasizes competition for the championship that Misterio will truly thrive.

① **Nunzio and a few others might protest, but Rey Misterio Jr., to us, is clearly the crown jewel of the WWE cruiserweight division. He's quick, he's agile, and he's innovative, but he's also smarter than you might realize.**

[[the analysis]]

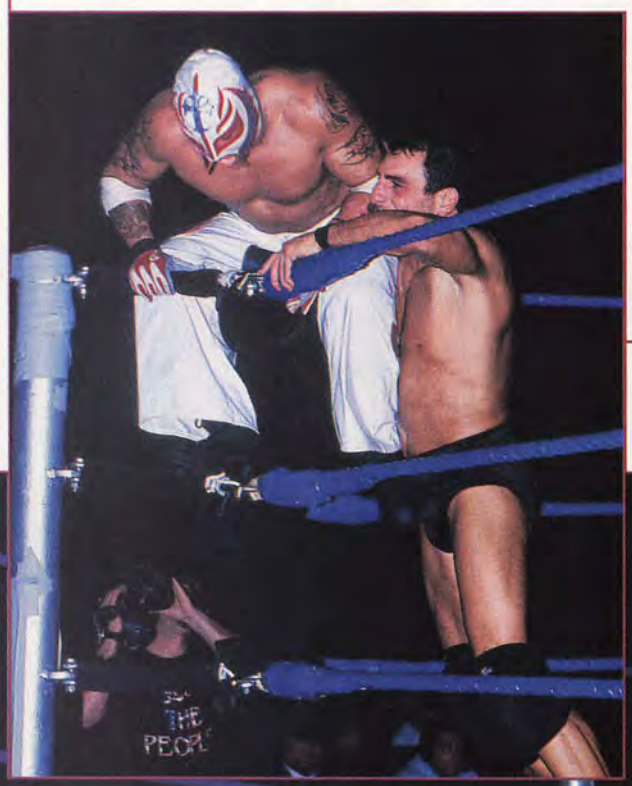
Repertoire: Rey Misterio Jr. became known as the most innovative wrestler in the business after he burst upon *WCW Monday Nitro* in 1996, and it's amazing that he still has that reputation as a member of the Smackdown roster in 2003. He popularized the huracanrana and plancha seven years ago, and is doing the same for the 619 and West Coast pop today. Interestingly, his hiatuses due to injury have often given him time to update his style.

Strengths: Why hasn't this aerial daredevil crashed and burned by now? It's because Misterio doesn't believe his high-flying style has to be a high-*risk* style. The 619 and West Coast pop, for example, are hardly risky at all, yet their innovative nature makes them exciting. The same can be said for his huracanranas and baseball slides. Timing and pacing make him a master, not an overdependence on crazy out-of-the-ring corkscrew planchas.

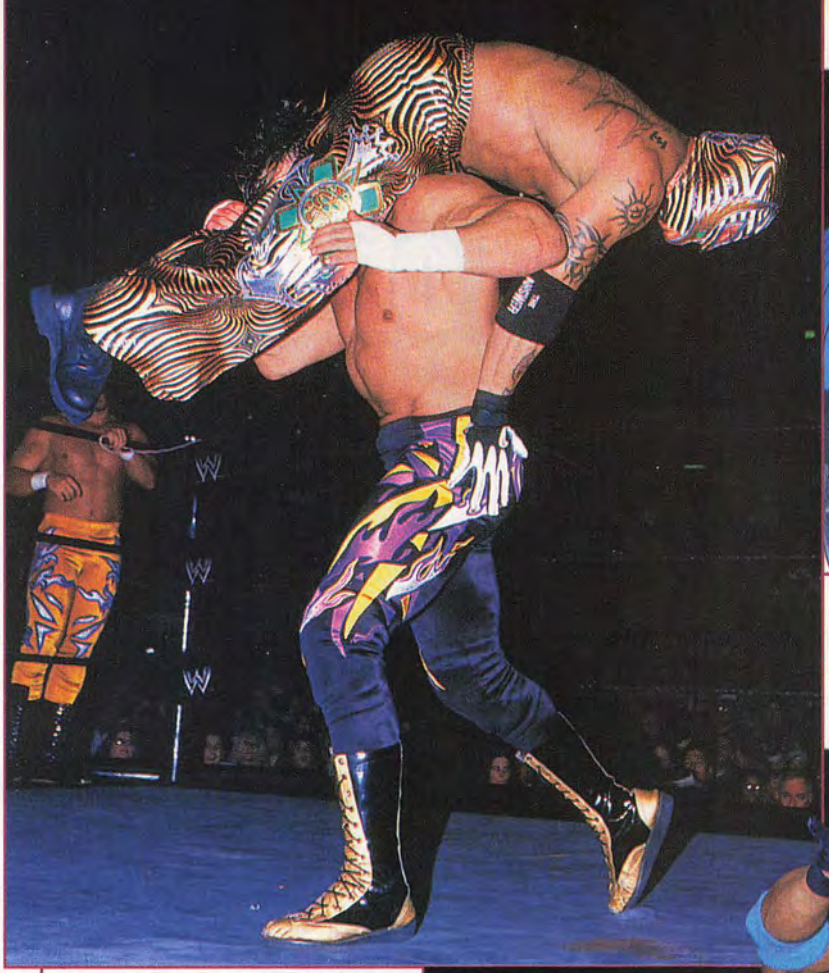
Weaknesses: A torn ACL took Misterio out of a hot feud with Chris Jericho at the peak of his WCW career, and forced him to miss five months. He suffered from more knee problems just before WCW's demise, and underwent another surgery before joining WWE in 2002. Scoping procedures have become routine. Misterio might need dual knee replacements by age 50, and could be looking at some ankle fusions.

Defining Career Moment: His lowlight occurred at SuperBrawl, held in February 1999, when he and Konnan lost to Scott Hall and Kevin Nash. He was forced to unmask as part of a prematch stipulation. Some wondered if the Luchador's career could recover. Yet his career highlight occurred the very next night. He cleanly pinned Nash on *WCW Monday Nitro,* one of many wins that catapulted him to number four in the 1999 *"PWI* 500."

Future: Despite his dynamic style, Misterio's career tends to go stale after being in a promotion more than a couple of years. The bitter truth is that WWE fans may grow tired of too many 619s, West Coast pops, and cruiserweight matches that aren't pushed as being very important. For whatever reason, creative teams have done little to broaden his character. If Master P and his No Limit Soldiers appear on *Smackdown,* Rey-Rey had better run the other way.



② **Misterio isn't likely to stay grounded for long against Nunzio or an opponent much bigger. He knows he's most effective and dangerous when he goes to the air, even if it appears his opponent is setting him up for a move!**



③ Eddie Guerrero seems to have figured out that the best way to beat Misterio isn't to try to outdo him at his own game. Quick, basic, high-impact maneuvers are usually difficult for the Luchador to counter, but he has a lot of tricks in his game.

④ Wristlocks, bearhugs, and other submission holds can have a weardown effect on Misterio. Yet he has gotten stronger in recent years, and if he sees the slightest opening and thinks he can reverse a hold, he'll go for it.

The Wrestling Observer

Hall of Fame

In each issue, *PWI* will honor one member of the *Wrestling Observer* Hall of Fame, which we recognize as the sport's official Hall of Fame

Atsushi Onita

THE MAN JAPANESE fans adoringly call "Mr. Liar"—the same man they went on the elect to the Diet (the Japanese equivalent of Congress)—is one of the most charismatic men in recent wrestling history.

Atsushi Onita revolutionized wrestling by ushering in the age of ultraviolence through popularization of such bloodbaths as the barbed-wire barricade electric landmine double-hell death match.

In the U.S., Onita is best remembered for a handful of appearances he made with ECW, during which he butted heads with The Sandman. On the international scene, Onita's name became synonymous with Frontier Martial Arts Wrestling (FMW), the renegade "garbage wrestling" promotion he helped to create in 1989. Like ECW five years later, FMW took wrestling to the extreme, relaxing disqualification rules and allowing the use of thumbtacks, daggers, swords, and other weapons in special matches.

FMW shook up the Japanese *puroresu* scene, where tradition and athleticism are highly revered, and the young promotion cultivated a devoted fan following. Like fellow Hall of Famers Terry Funk and Mick Foley in the U.S., Onita became an icon of the bloody hardcore style, and like Funk and Foley, his career started quite differently.

Onita began wrestling in 1974 as a high-flying All-Japan junior heavyweight. In 1982, he beat Chavo Guerrero Sr. to win the first of his three NWA international junior heavyweight titles. But Onita never quite caught on like New Japan's sensational Tiger Mask, and after several years in AJPW and Mexico's CMLL, he announced his first of several retirements in 1985 because of knee injuries.

Not surprisingly, Onita wasn't able to resist the pull of the ring. In the late-1980s, he returned to "declare his independence," and swore off competing for All-Japan and New Japan. In early-1989, Onita went to a card promoted by the shoot-influenced UWFi promotion with a "letter of challenge" and was turned away at the door. This was a moral victory for Onita, as he hyped the fact that UWFi competitors were

Onita rakes the face of Mr. Pogo across a strand of barbed wire during another bloody match. Basic barbed-wire matches soon became tame by his standards!

It's unfortunate that although Onita made several appearances in ECW and called out The Sandman, we never got to see a showdown between the two.

When Onita struck an opponent with a chair, as Kensuke Sasaki would find out, he made sure said opponent remembered that chair shot!

afraid to fight him. In October 1989, he launched FMW.

On August 4, 1990, Onita promoted the first no-rope, barbed wire electric explosive death match (he beat Tarzan Goto). From there, matches only got more intense. They involved thumbtacks, landmines, time bombs, broken glass, and other instruments of carnage. A showman in the mold of P.T. Barnum (hence the "Mr. Liar" moniker), Onita often claimed his goal was to accrue more than 1,000 stitches in his body before his career ended (he says he has surpassed that).

When not trying to blow up an opponent or carve flesh from bone, Onita favored the thunder fire power bomb as his finisher and the jumping DDT, bulldog, and side suplex as setup manuevers.

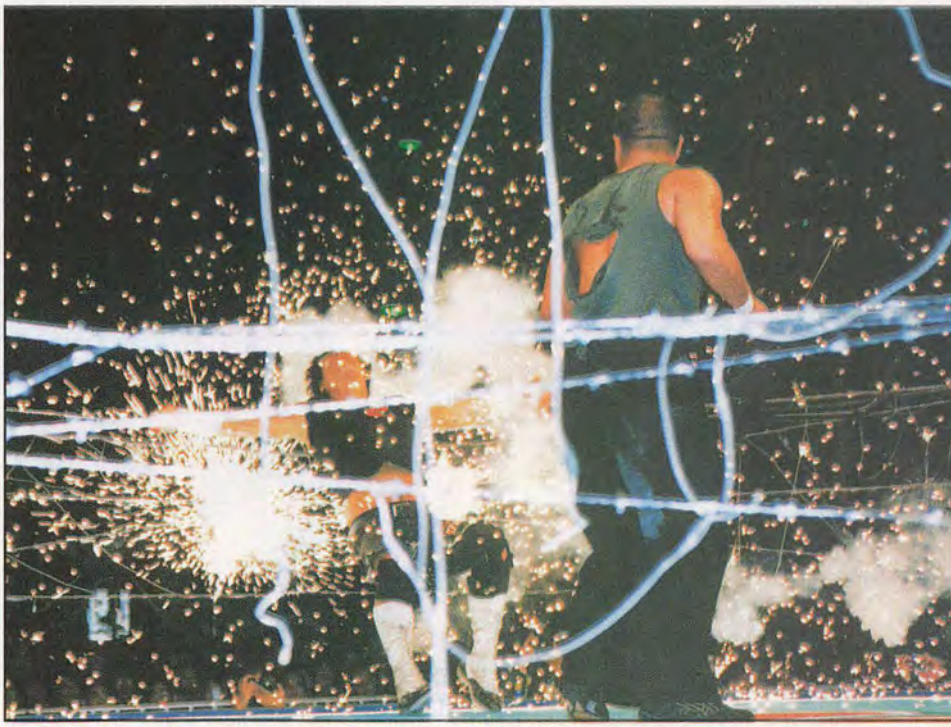
On May 5, 1993, Onita defeated Funk in an exploding ring, barbed-wire landmine match. The victory over the former NWA World champion is considered by many to be his career highlight.

In 1994, he reinvented himself as The Great Nita, a face-painted parody of The Great Muta. Muta and Nita would square off in an exploding ring barbed-wire match in September 1999, with Muta taking the win.

In the mid-1990s, Onita retired once again, settling in to an on-air position as the owner of FMW and allowing Megumi Kudo, The Gladiator, and Hayabusa to take over in the ring. Onita returned in 1997 and wrestled periodically through 2000. Like Terry Funk, he has wrestled in numerous retirement bouts that turned out not to be retirement matches after all.

After his last retirement, Onita, a high school dropout, returned to school in a highly publicized attempt to stress education to students. In 2001, he was elected to the Diet, where he continues to push for educational programs.

His influence on wrestling—both in Japan and throughout the U.S.—is unmistakable. □



Talk about danger! "Mr. Liar" loved wrestling in complicated specialty matches that had the word "electric" in their titles somewhere. And yes, he got shocked quite often.

independent roundup

By Liz Hunter

IPW HARDCORE WRESTLING, arguably Florida's top promotion, ceased operations following its September 20 show in Davie, Florida. Founded in 1998, IPW quickly became one of the hottest independent promotions in North America and had amassed a top-quality roster that featured some of the best of the independents, including **Scoot Andrews**, **Christopher Daniels**, **Steve Corino**, and **Mike** and **Todd Shane**. IPW had even unified its belts with other promotions in Florida, making for several interpromotional feuds to fuel the Florida scene. The promotion's roster and titles have been transferred to NWA Florida, a promotion that IPW took over not too long ago.

"I would like to thank the fans and workers of IPW for five of the best years of my life," IPW owner **Ron Niemi** said in a prepared statement. "But even more so, my wife for tolerating more nonsense than any person should have to put up with during that time. I love wrestling and my heart will always be in the business, but I had to walk away from IPW and focus on myself and my family for the first time in a long time. It is great to know that my good friend **Joe Price** from NWA Florida is taking the torch and is going to run with it, and he has the total support of myself and some of the best talent on the indy scene today. I will miss everybody so much that words really can't do it justice, so once again all I can say is thank you for the memories and for allowing me to live out my dream!"

In other NWA news, **Bill Behrens** was elected president of the National Wrestling Alliance at the 55th anniversary convention in Parkersburg, West Virginia. And two more promotions joined the alliance, NWA Florida and NWA Championship Wrestling From Florida.

Several Independent Wrestling Federation stars were featured in the WWE Survivor Series commercial. **Kevin Knight**, **Roman**, **Fred Sampson**, **Shawn Donovan**, and **Brandon Young** participated as members of that struggling football team opposite **Kurt Angle**, **The Big Show**, **Chris Benoit**, **The Dudley Boyz**, **The APA**, **John Cena**, **The Hurricane**, and **Rey Misterio Jr.** ... Northeast indy standout **Johnny Heartbreaker** is featured in the new Stacker 2 YJ Stinger ads along with **Stacy Keibler**. The ads will be featured in several magazines, including *Cosmopolitan*.

Bobby Rude won the inaugural Maritime cup, pinning **Mike Hughes** in the finals of the tournament held in Halifax, Nova Scotia ... **Adrian Whisper** defeated **Sean Lei** by submission in 7:26 to win the King of Virginia Tournament ... MainStream Wrestling recently celebrated its third anniversary ... **Sweet Sarah** has debuted in Mexico for *Lu-*

Mike and Todd Shane will have one less place to wrestle now that IPW Hardcore Wrestling has folded. These humongous twins have dominated the tag team scene in IPW for years. Now NWA Florida is their home base.

cha Libre Feminil and AAA ... In an extraordinary matchup, Power Championship Wrestling champion **Quentin Towne** pinned **Seattle Slew**. It was Slew's best showing since he won the 1977 Triple Crown of horse racing. What made this wrestling match even more amazing is that Slew died in 2002. Of course, it could be a human using the same name, but that wouldn't be nearly as noteworthy as the horse rising from the dead to wrestle a match ... Ultimate Pro Wrestling has announced that Raw Dawg energy drink is now its official sponsor.

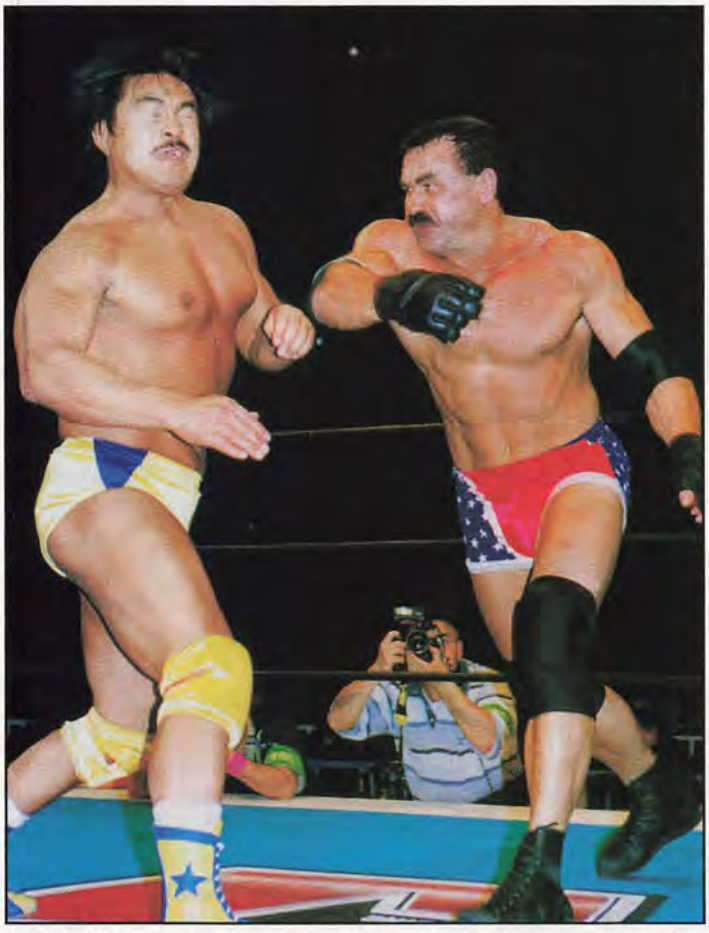
Quick title changes: Xtreme Intense Championship Wrestling, Warren, MI, October 12: **Danny Daniels** defeated **Jimmy Jacobs** in a best-of-three-falls match to win the cruiserweight title ... **Jaimy Coxxx** and **Alex Shelly** defeated tag team champs **Silas Young** and **Gavin Starr** to win the title ... **The DBA** won a three-way dance against **Deranged** and **Mike T.S.G.** to win the Xtreme title ... ***Twin Lakes Wrestling, Big Clifty, KY, October 12:*** **Trent Richards** defeated **Rob G Rock** to become the inaugural ironman champion ... **Vic the Bruiser** defeated **Jon Rock** to become the inaugural heavyweight champion ... ***Southern Wrestling Alliance, Hendersonville, NC, October 11:*** **Dynamite Kid** beat **Scotty Smooth** to win the lightweight title ... ***Keystone Championship Wrestling, Altoona, PA, October 11:*** **Youth Gone Wild** defeated tag team champs **Xtreme** in a ladder match to win the title ... **Mercury Flash** defeated Central Pennsylvania champ **Kidd Country** in a bullrope match to win the title ... **Sebastian** defeated **The Sandman** and hardcore champ **Charlie Mansun** to win the title ... **Kasanova Kato** defeated heavyweight champ **Big Lenny** in a no-disqualification match to win the title ... ***Union of Independent Professional Wrestlers, Erie, PA, October 11:*** **Sterling James Keenan** defeated **Fabulous** in a ladder match to win the Keystone State cruiserweight title ... **Matt Cross** pinned **Jerry Lynn** to win the vacant heavyweight title ... ***Neo Pro Wrestling, Cottage Grove, MN, October 11:*** **Pete Huge** beat **Joey E** to win the cruiserweight title ... ***NAWA, Rome, GA, October 11:*** **Nick Rampage** beat **Bulldog Raines** to win the Silver Six Tournament and capture the TV title ... **Ace Rockwell** and **Shawn Tempers** beat **Jay Fury** and **Justin Ramey** in a ladder match to win the tag team title ... ***Midwest Powerhouse Wrestling Results, Quincy, IL, October 11:*** ... **Chico Es Loco** won a three-way dance against **Steven Bishop** and hardcore champion **Jason Wells** to win the title ... ***Championship International Wrestling, Pittsford, MI, October 11:*** **Brad Anderson** defeated U.S. champion **Gary Dawson** to win the title ... ***Central Wrestling Alliance, Georgetown, KY, October 5:*** **Ray Steele** defeated heavyweight champ **Big Dog Barry D** to win the title ... ***Texas Xtreme Wrestling, Corpus Christi, TX, October 4:*** **Massive** defeated **Black Gordman** to win the heavyweight title ... ***Chaotic Wrestling, Methuen, MA, October 4:*** **Arch Kincaid** won a four-way dance against **Vince Vicallo**, **Luis Ortiz**, and heavyweight champion **Billy Kryptonite** to win the title ... ***Urban Empire Wrestling, Philadelphia, PA, October 4:*** **Qenaan Creed** defeated **Sonny Siaki** to win the inaugural heavyweight title ... ***Ringside Championship Wrestling, Gibsonville, NC, October 4:*** **Unholy Empire** defeated tag champs **The Crew** to win the title ... ***Rochester Pro Wrestling, Rochester, NY, October 4:*** **Justice** pinned **Matrix** in the finals of a tournament to declare a new heavyweight champion ... **The Dreamboats** defeated **Big 'N' Tasty** in a ladder match to win the vacant tag team title ... **J.C. Money** won a three-way match against **Spazz** and **Gabriel Saint** to win the light heavyweight title ... **Steve Kruze** won a four-way match against **Dicky Sanchez**, **Charisma**, and **Fusion** to win the TV title ... ***Next Generation of Wrestling, Cleburne, TX, September 26:*** **The New Spoiler** defeated heavyweight champion **Chico Torres** for the title ... ***NWA/ECCW Pacific Northwest, Surrey, BC, September 26:*** **Vance Nevada** beat heavyweight champion **Scotty Mac** in a cage match for the title ... **Memphis** & **Michael Raines** defeated tag champs **Jungle Fever** to win the title. □

Matt Cross won the UIPW heavyweight title by defeating his mentor, Jerry Lynn, on the October 11 show in Erie, Pennsylvania.

the international report

By Mike Spillane

IN AN EFFORT to boost declining attendance in Japan, some of the country's most prominent promotions are booking novelty title matches for big arena shows. Pro Wrestling NOAH, the group headed by **Mitsuharu Misawa**, will be gambling an entire upcoming Budokan Hall show on the strength of two such matches. In the main event, reigning Global Honored Crown champion **Kenta Kobashi** signed to face former champion **Yoshinari Ogawa**. Ogawa is a junior heavyweight who managed to capture and hold the GHC heavyweight gold for five months in 2002. He was eventually destroyed by **Yoshihiro Takayama** in a lopsided affair and hadn't been considered for another title match until now.



What's with the mixing of the worlds of mixed martial arts and wrestling in Japan? All-Japan is going that route now, with this man, Dan Frye (shown against Hiroshi Hase), who's more of a mixed martial artist than a wrestler, challenging for the Triple Crown.

His reign was largely considered a novelty act, and once it wore thin, Ogawa was pushed out of the title picture. Whether or not the public has any interest in seeing Ogawa challenge for the title again is hard to say. The big Budokan show was also scheduled to feature NOAH's junior heavyweight champion, **Takashi Sugiura**, defending against a representative from New Japan Pro Wrestling, **Gedo**.

Considering Gedo isn't even close to being considered among NJPW's top tier of juniors, his inclusion in this match has many fans wondering what the point of such an interpromotional showdown could be. If top-level talents like **Koji Kanemoto**, **Jushin Liger**, and **Tiger Mask IV** aren't interested in challenging for the title, what does that say about the championship? Moreover, what does it say about NOAH's junior division if a New Japan "B"-lister like Gedo can leap ahead of all of them to get a title shot?

Like NOAH, All-Japan is trying to book new title matches, and **Toshiaki Kawada's** upcoming title defense against New Japan's **Don Frye** follows in the current trend of blurring the lines between pro wrestling and mixed martial arts. Kawada, the recently crowned Triple Crown champion, will put his gold up for grabs at this year's anniversary show. To boost ticket sales of late, All-Japan has tried just about everything, from putting together interpromotional bouts to booking a contingent of wrestlers to imitate top WWE stars' looks and moves.

To combat loss of interest, New Japan continues to spotlight mixed martial arts fighters, and has assembled a formidable stable of fighters under **Antonio Inoki** to face off against New Japan's finest. Historically, every time New Japan has tried to make a new star by placing one of its wrestlers in a match against a martial arts fighter, it has ended up getting embarrassed. Many NJPW fans have grown tired of seeing their wrestling heroes knocked out or pummeled in non-wrestling matches, and this has forced New Japan to seek out other novelty matches to headline events.

Inoki was able to sign **Hulk Hogan** for a match against **Masa Chono** on the big October 13 Tokyo Dome show. Hogan, the very first IWGP heavyweight champion (he won the new title in June 1983, before "Hulkamania" took off), defeated the legendary Chono with a clothesline (he calls it an ax

bomber in Japan). After the match, Hogan talked about wrestling Inoki and perhaps even challenging for that IWGP belt again. Jeff Jarrett, however, jumped Hogan before his postmatch press conference ended, leaving him bloody and setting up their November 30 NWA-TNA showdown.

Seventy years of Lucha Libre were celebrated at Arena Mexico at the end of September, as EMLL, the longest-running wrestling promotion in history, played to a full house at its home base in Mexico City. The card was headlined by a hair vs. hair match between **Shocker**, the company's most popular star, and **Tarzan Boy**, a despised *rudo.* It came down to the third and deciding fall before Shocker defeated Tarzan Boy, and he was shaved bald. The undercard also saw **Violencia** unmasked by **Pierroth Jr.**

Violencia is an on-again, off-again member of **Los Infiernos**, along with **Ultimo Guerrero** and **Rey Bucanero**. In some cases, though, the loss of a mask spell the end of a Luchador's career, and by law, a wrestler cannot don a new mask or adopt a different ring name for a period of six months after his face is revealed. Unlike here in the United States, where such stipulations are rarely taken seriously, the Mexican Commission on Lucha Libre is known to strictly enforce stipulations, and regularly levies fines and suspensions against offenders.

Fans in Europe, Japan, and even the United States had to be disappointed upon hearing that news that high-flying, risk-taking Jodie Fleisch was retiring at the tender age of 22.

The Great Sasuke and **Super Delfin** have had a strange relationship over the years, but it seems that these two iconic masked men have managed to put their long-standing differences aside. Years ago, **Ninja Sasuke** and **Monkey Magic Wakita** (Delfin's former ring name) were two young junior heavyweights struggling to make names for themselves. They trained in Japan, and later in Mexico, before rising to cult stardom in **Gran Hamada's** Universal promotion in the early-1990s. Eventually, Sasuke formed Michinoku Pro, and his rivalry with Delfin became the centerpiece of the fledgling independent group. Away from Michinoku, both men enjoyed national stardom. Sasuke faced **Chris Benoit** in the finals of the famous 1994 Super J Cup, while Delfin went on to the finals of the Best of the Super Junior round-robin tournament opposite Jushin Liger that same year.

However, the personal rivalry between Delfin and Sasuke climaxed at the end of the 1990s, when Delfin led a small group of Michinoku stars in a mass exodus and formed his own group, Osaka Pro. Since then, the two have been quite open about their dislike for each other, although both certainly owe each other a certain debt for their individual popularity. While Michinoku Pro has certainly seen better days, Sasuke is enjoying a great deal of fame at the moment for his elected position in the Japanese Diet and the controversy surrounding his insistence upon wearing a mask. Delfin's Osaka Pro has finally blossomed into one of Japan's finest independents. Now, Delfin and Sasuke have at last agreed to work together again, and a singles match between the two will headline an event commemorating 10 years of Michinoku Pro.

Michinoku Pro was the company in which British star **Jodie Fleisch** first rose to international stardom as a masked man named **Doc Chan** that could run up walls and perform shooting star presses to the arena floor. Since being unmasked in the finals of the Masked League Tournament years back, Fleisch became a semi-regular with the company, while also appearing all over Europe and occasionally popping up in the United States.

Calling Fleisch's in-ring style "daredevil" barely does it justice; the man was frequently counted among the world's best high-flyers, and was even ranked by this magazine among the biggest risk-takers of the last generation by virtue of his mind-boggling aerial stunts. His trademark move, the 720 DDT, is a crazed, twisting springboard into the ring, ending with a DDT that seems to arrive out of the eye of a hurricane.

Fans of the young sensation (Fleisch is just 22 years old, despite having seven years of experience) were disheartened to learn of his retirement, announced on his Web site at the end of the summer. Fleisch cited personal reasons for leaving the world of wrestling, although we can safely assume that the toll of such high-risk wrestling played at least a small part in the decision.

Fleisch will not embark on a retirement or farewell tour; his departure from the ring was immediate, sudden, and a true shock to fans on several continents. □

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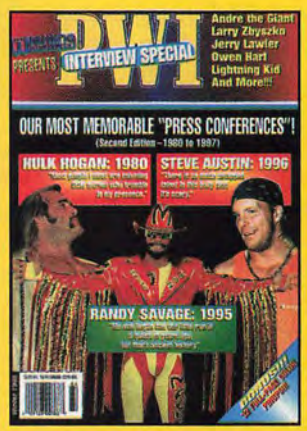

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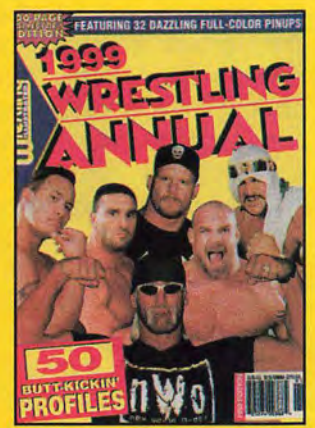

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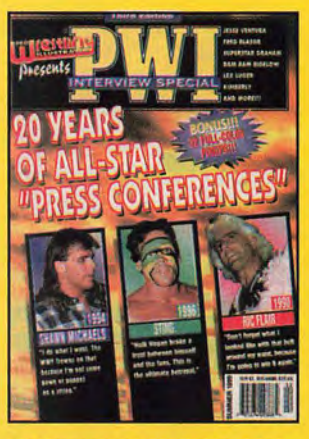

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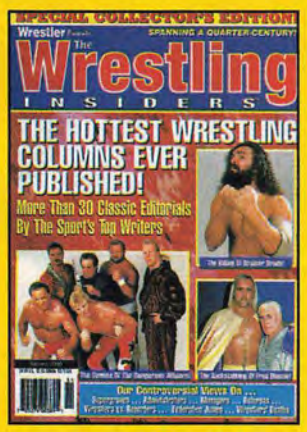
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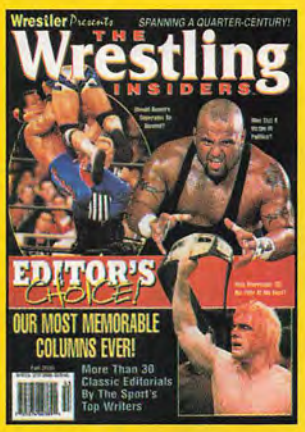
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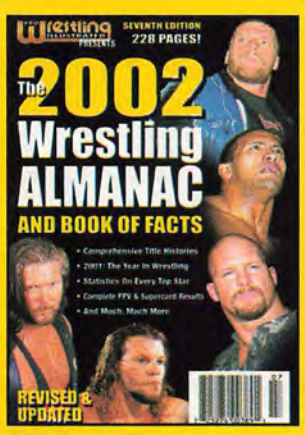

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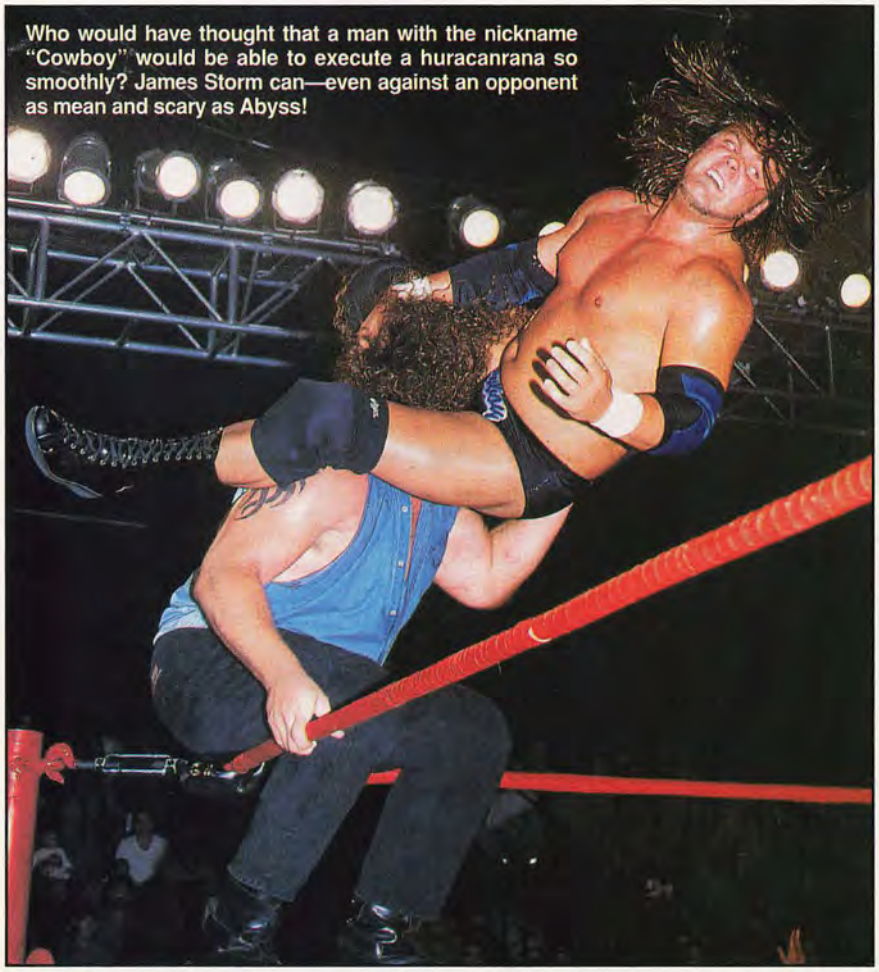
Spotlight Card of the Month

NASHVILLE—NWA-TNA pay-per-view at the Fairgrounds Coliseum: **Kid Kash** & **Abyss** defeated **Chris Harris** & **James Storm** ... NWA-TNA X champion **Michael Shane** pinned **Jerry Lynn** ... **Christopher Daniels** pinned **D-Lo Brown** ... **Sonny Siaki** & **Ekmo** beat **Shark Boy** & **Mad Mikey** ... **The Sandman** pinned **David Young** ... **B.G. James, Ron Killings,** & **Konnan** defeated **Sinn, Slash,** & **Vampiro** by disqualification ... **Jeff Jarrett** & **Dusty Rhodes** defeated **Vince Russo** & **A.J. Styles.**
(10-01-03)

—"Spotlight" photos by Vern Verna



Who would have thought that a man with the nickname "Cowboy" would be able to execute a huracanrana so smoothly? James Storm can—even against an opponent as mean and scary as Abyss!

UNITED STATES

ALABAMA

HUNTSVILLE—Southern Wrestling Alliance at Scott High School: **Bad Medicine** pinned **Adam Antieum** ... **Jason Fear** pinned **Kevin Ages** ... **The Franchise** pinned **Rage** ... **Eric Adamz** pinned **John Justice** ... **Doink the Clown** defeated U.S. champion **Diamond Studd** by countout ... Heavyweight champion **Jack Diamond** wrestled **Gabe Casteel** to a no-contest.
(10-04-03)

—Paul Ledbetter

GADSDEN—Five Star Wrestling at Southside High School: **Icarus** defeated **American Psycho** ... **Mike Jackson** defeated **Will Owens** ... **Jack Lord** beat **J.C. Skyye** ... **Fredrick O'Neal** & **Scott Reznor** defeated **Workin' Man** & **Justin Envy** ... **Lash LeRoux** defeated **Bull Buchanan** ... **Adam Hunter** beat **Cabana Man Dan, Air Paris, Brian Sterling,** and **The Inhuman Fly** in a five-star elimination match, taking home the Fiver Cup.
(09-25-03)

—Jason Coleman

ARKANSAS

HARRISON—Mid-States Wrestling at the Fairgrounds Indoor Expo Building: ***Tournament for the vacant heavyweight title, quarterfinals:*** **Michael Barry** defeated **Dookie Grande** ... **Craig Keesman** beat **Jake Boulder** ... **Jason Jones** defeated **Big John O'Malley** by disqualification ... **Babyface Nelson** defeated **Tanker** ... ***Semi-finals:*** Barry beat Jones ... Keesman defeated Nelson ... ***Finals:*** Barry beat Keesman to win the tournament and the title.
(09-27-03)

—John Thomas

CALIFORNIA

MODESTO—All Pro Wrestling Central Valley at the Fat Cat Music House & Lounge: **Nathan Rulez** won a battle royal ... **Larry Blackwell, Nathan Rulez,** & **Lance Chandler** beat **Big Sal, Orlando Mathias,** & **Dana Lee** ... **Joey Ryan** beat **J.T. Hyatt** ... APW-LA lightweight champion **Scott Lost** beat **Billy Blade** ... **James Watkins** defeated **Disco Machine** ... Internet champion **B-Boy** won a three-way extreme tables match against **James Choi** and **Lil' Cholo** ... **Vennis DeMarco** & **Chris Cole** beat **Melissa** & **Tiffany.**
(09-28-03)

—Selena Suarez

FLORIDA

DAVIE—IPW Hardcore Wrestling/NWA Florida at Davie Junction: **New Jack** defeated **Chaos** in a South Florida streetfight ... **David Babylon** won a last-man-standing match against **Mikey Tenderfoot, Rod Steel, Justice, Johnny Vandal,** and **Jerrell Clark** ... **Antonio Banks** & **Punisher** beat **Midian** & **Sean Allen** ... **Danny Doring** defeated **Bruce Steele** by disqualification ... IPW tag team champs **The Shane Twins** defeated **Chasyn Rance** & **Mikey Batts** ... **Maximum Capacity** defeated **Sedrick Strong** ... **Brian Anderson** beat **Pretty Fly** ... **The Vandalz** defeated **Double Deuce.**
(09-20-03)

—Doug Maxwell

OCOEE—Regional Championship Wrestling's "Rumble Mania 3" at the Event Center: **Vince Bono** won a 10-man battle royal ... ***Tournament for the***

vacant heavyweight title, semifinals: **Flamingo Kid Pinky** beat **Jack Bailey** ... **Magnum Steele** defeated **Angel of Darkness** ... **Jerrelle Clark** defeated **Bonez the Cutthroat** in a best-of-three-falls match ... Tag team champions **The Skater Boys** wrestled to a double-disqualification with **Sex & Money** ... **Bodacious Pretty Boy** beat **C.B. Kool** ... ***Tournament for the vacant heavyweight title, finals:*** Steele beat Pinky to win the title.
(09-13-03)

—Barry J. Walker

GEORGIA

HARTWELL—Exodus Wrestling Alliance at the Hart County Middle School: **George South Jr.** beat **Jason King** ... **Jason Jones** beat **Mike Lee** ... **Jimmy Powell** beat **Ethan Cage**... **Rick Morton** beat **The Barbarian** ... **Bambi** beat **Storm** to win the ladies title ... **Masked Superstar** beat heavyweight champion **George South Sr.** to win the title.
(10-04-03)

—Danny Parris

LAVONIA—IWA at the Elementary School: **Tommy Sawyer** defeated Internet champion **Phillip Pain** to win the title ... Tag team champs **Dale Dwindle** & **Lance Christopher** defeated **Logan Kincayde** & **Derrick Ravage** ... **James Boulevard** beat **Casey J** (**Lacy Capone** was the special referee) ... **Tow Truck** & **John Rordan** defeated **J.T.** & **Bart Justice** ... **Corpse** defeated **Tower** by disqualification ... **Billy Starr** & **Panhead Nelson** beat **Rahn Jordan** & **Golden Eagle**.
(10-04-03)

—Carrie Jensen

CORNELIA—NWA Wildside at the NWA Arena: **Yako Romero, Forsaken,** & **Ikarus** defeated **Mr. Big, Lil' Willy,** & **Big Johnson** ... **Jay Fury** defeated **Shawn Tempers** ... **Rainman, Azrael, Todd Sexton,** & **Shadow** defeated **T.C. Carnage, Max Magnus, Keary Krisp,** & **Manchild** ... **Jeremy V** beat **Andrew Alexander** ... **Skeeter Frost** & **Nemesis** defeated **Adam Roberts** & **Zero X** ... **Nick Halen** defeated **Salvatore Rinauro** in a strap match.
(09-19-03)

—Doug Dorn

ILLINOIS

DANVILLE—Superstars of American Wrestling at the Bingo Hall: Ironman champion **Gravedigger** defeated **Psycho** ... **Bubba Black** beat **Bryan Johnson** in a blindfold match ... **Stacy Starr** won a three-way match against **Lucy** and **Anita Dix** ... **The Phoenix** beat **Apollo** ... **Bubba Black** beat **Action Jackson** ... **Hawaii 5.0** beat **The Kleptomaniacs** ... **Eric Draven** defeated **Fist of Rage** in a chain-on-a-pole match ... Heavyweight champion **Chris Jester** defeated **Bruiser Brady**.
(10-13-03)

—Nate Carson

PEORIA—Next Generation Wrestling at the Athletic Club: **M.C. Trip C** defeated **Diablo de Azul** ... **Ray the Wrestler** beat **Russ Stevens** ... **Sinnister** defeated **Deacon Hobbs** by disqualification ... **Johnny Justice** defeated **Ryan Phoenix** ... **Jester** beat **Chris Brown** ... **Justin MacIntyre** defeated heavyweight champion **Scott Keyes** to win the title.
(10-11-03)

—Jason Pemberton

PEORIA—WWE at the Civic Center: **Lance Storm** pinned **Test** ... **Mark Henry** & **Rodney Mack** defeated **The Hurricane** & **Rosey** ... **Rico** pinned **Tommy Dreamer** ... Intercontinental champion **Christian** pinned **Rob Van Dam** ... Raw tag team champions **Buh Buh Ray** & **D-Von Dudley** beat **Rob Conway** & **Rene Dupree** in a table match ... **Trish Stratus** & **Lita** defeated **Jacquelyn** & **Victoria** (**Val Venis** was the guest referee) ... **Shane McMahon** defeated **Kane** in a streetfight ... **Bill Goldberg** & **Maven** defeated **Ric Flair** & **Randy Orton**.
(09-28-03)

—Brandon King

QUINCY—Midwest Powerhouse Wrestling at Roller Country: **Marcus Mansfield** defeated **Christian Haze** ... **Jaden** pinned **Gary Michael G** ... **Big Country** defeated **Agent U** by disqualification ... **Chico Es Loco** beat **Steven Bishop** and hardcore champion **Jason Wells** in a three-way dance to win the title ... **The Searcher** pinned **Yingish Yang** ... **The Searcher, Christian Haze, Chico Es Loco,** & **Big Country** beat **Marcus Mansfield, Jason Wells, Agent U,** & **Yingish Yang** in an elimination match.
(10-10-03)

—Chip Leffler

This sure looks like a chokehold to us, even if the referee can't quite see what TNA X champ Michael Shane is doing to Jerry Lynn. Shane has had to be crafty to hold on to his title.

INDIANA

FORTVILLE—American Championship Wrestling at the Boys and Girls Club: **Ric Ravage** defeated **Bobby Black** and **Kris Kage** in a three-way dance ... **TVZ** defeated **Ivan Burden** & **Riot** ... **Hillbilly Jed** pinned **John Wall** ... **The Sheik of Baghdad** defeated **Don Demarco** ... **Kenny Nash** defeated **The Bouncer** ... **Johnnie Walker** pinned **Damien Cole** ... **Bobo Brazil Jr.** & **Marty Graw** defeated **Skip Radisson** & **Rob Kincade** ... **Uncle Ernie** pinned **The Russian Assassin**.
(10-11-03)

—Randy Klemme

MADISON—Supreme Championship Wrestling at the Madison Township Fire Department: **Billy Maverick** defeated **Stevie Sanchez** ... TV champion **Brandon Hunter** & **Phobia** defeated **Fuego Rey** & **Mr. Desire** ... **Adrian Scott** beat **Mac Davis** by disqualification ... **The Dysfunctional Family** defeated **Xtreme Lee Dangerous** & **Fast Eddie** ... **Cru Jones** beat **The Navajo Warrior** by submission ... Hardcore champion **Mason the Mangler** beat **Ghostwalker** ... **Eric Draven** defeated **Joey Moore** in a TLC match.
(10-11-03)

—Linda Lorne

COLUMBUS—Hoosier Pro Wrestling at the 4-H Fairgrounds Family Arts Building: **Chris Tindell** defeated **Jason Caemara** ... **Jack Powers** beat **Jesse Houston** ... **Ice** beat **Spazz** by submission ... **Mike Winters** beat **Billy Maverick** by disqualification ... **Sin-D** beat **Cameron Starr** ... **Austin James** beat heavyweight champion **Louis Lovins** by disqualification ... Tag team champions **Donny Idol** & **Dave Dynasty** wrestled **Pompano Joe** & **Jesse Hyde** to a no-contest ... Light heavyweight champion **Tiny Tim** beat **Brian Beech** in a ladder match.
(10-04-03)

—Billy Maverick

VALPARAISO—WWE at the Athletic/Recreation Center: **Chris Benoit** beat **John Cena** ... **Jamie Noble** defeated **Nunzio** ... **Rhyno** pinned **Orlando Jordan** ... **Bradshaw** & **Ron Simmons** beat **A-Train** & **Sean O'Haire** ... **Matt Hardy** & **Shannon Moore** defeated **Paul London** & **Spanky** ... Smackdown champion **Brock Lesnar** beat **Kurt Angle** ... Cruiserweight champion **Tajiri** pinned **Rey Misterio Jr.** ... **Shaniqua** defeated **Dawn Marie** & **Nidia** in a handicap match ... Smackdown tag team champions **Eddie** & **Chavo Guerrero Jr.** beat **The Basham Brothers**.
(09-29-03)

—Larry Twitchell

SOUTH BEND—New Breed Wrestling Association at ZB Falcons: **Machine** defeated **The Cosmic Kid** ... **Joey Pink** defeated **Silas Young** ... **Chad Collyer** won a triple threat match against **Matt Stryker** and **Rory Fox** ... **Simply Marvelous** defeated **Danny Daniels** & **Adam Evans** ... **Nigel McGuinness** and **Cody Hawk** co-won a battle royal ... **Nigel McGuinness** wrestled **Cody Hawk** to a double-countout ... Heavyweight champion **Shark Boy** defeated **B.J. Whitmer**.
(09-19-03)

—Brian Schoonaert

KENTUCKY

HARLAN—Premier Championship Wrestling at the Old Hall Gymnasium: Cruiserweight champion **Tony Glory** defeated **Riot** ... **Ryan Dookie** won a three-way match against **Scotty Raye** and **Kimo Phatu** ... U.S. champion **Drake Barr** beat **Danaconda** ... Heavyweight champion **Jimbo Collins** beat **Space Cadet** ... **Billy Maverick** defeated **Tim Lightning** by disqualification ... Hardcore champ **Overkill** defeated **Brad Steiner** ... **Eddie T** defeated **Chris Creature** by submission ... Tag team champions **Mike Stone** & **The Regulator** defeated **The Thugs**.
(10-13-03)

—James Collins

Chris Daniels is no match for D-Lo Brown in any test of strength. Then again, the "Fallen Angel" isn't known for his strength. He found a way to put Brown's shoulders on the mat in the end.

BIG CLIFTY—Twin Lakes Wrestling at the Hornback Auction House: **All Star McStoots** defeated **Texas Renegade** ... **Crazy Skillz** defeated **Hardrock Higdon** by disqualification ... **Simon Sezz** pinned **J.C. Bailey** ... **J.B. Thunder** & **Apollo** beat **Jail Break** & **Amazing Pooky** ... **Junkpile the Clown** pinned **Dub C** ... **Trent Richards** defeated **Rob G. Rock** to become the first ironman champion ... **Vic the Bruiser** defeated **Jon Rock** to become the inaugural heavyweight champion.
(10-12-03)

—Eddie Peters

GEORGETOWN—Central Wrestling Alliance at the Convention Center: **Redneck Superstar** defeated **Syxe** ... **Cujo** wrestled **Justen Idol** to a time-limit draw ... **Terry Alan** & **Shane Lewis** beat **Al Steele** & **Mongoose** by disqualification ... **Cherry** & **Jad T. Lungini** defeated **J.T. Money** & **Seduction** ... **Big Dog Barry D** beat **Ray Steele**.
(10-12-03)

—Mike Dennis

LOUISVILLE—WWE at the Broadbent Arena: **Maven** & **Trish Stratus** defeated **Steven Richards** & **Victoria** ... **Aaron Stevens** & **Nova** defeated OVW Southern tag team champions **Chris Cage** & **Tank Toland** to win the title ... **Mark Henry** & **Rodney Mack** beat **The Hurricane** & **Rosey** and **Garrison Cade** & **Mark Jindrak** in an elimination match ... **Val Venis** pinned **Spike Dudley** ... Raw tag team champions **Buh Buh Ray** & **D-Von Dudley** defeated **Rob Conway** & **Rene Dupree** in a table match ... **Shane McMahon**, **Lance Storm**, & **Rob Van Dam** beat **Chris Jericho**, **Christian**, & **Test** in a streetfight ... Women's champion **Molly Holly** beat **Lita** by disqualification (**Jazz** was the guest referee) ... **Booker T** & **Shawn Michaels** defeated **Ric Flair** & **Randy Orton**.
(10-10-03)

—Mike Fulton

MANCHESTER—Die-Hard Championship Wrestling at Young's Riverside Club: **Eric Draven** pinned **Brandon Scott** ... **Raybob** defeated **The Bounty Hunter** by disqualification ... **Paul Michaels** & **Kid Grunge** beat **J.T. Funk** & **Pitt** ... North American champion **Joey Bravo** defeated **Jimmy Studd** and **Danaconda** ... **Wicked Lester** defeated **Triple XXX** by disqualification ... **HellRaiser** beat **Jason Steele**.
(10-06-03)

—Joey Palumbo

CENTRAL CITY—Bad 2 The Bone Wrestling at the National Guard Armory: **Chuck Steele** pinned **Simon Sezz** ... Heavyweight champion **Vic the Bruiser** beat **Mr. Showtime** by disqualification in a bounty match ... **Billy Black** pinned **Big Bubba** ... **Max Misery** pinned **All Starr** ... Heavyweight champion **Vic the Bruiser** pinned **Apollo** ... **Billy Black** & **Chuck Steele** defeated **Todd Morton** & **Simon Sezz**.
(10-04-03)

—Joe Bailey

MAINE

PORTLAND—WWE at the Cumberland County Civic Center: **Booker T** & **Maven** beat **Chris Jericho** & **Scott Steiner** ... **Lance Storm** pinned **Rico** ... **Garrison Cade** & **Mark Jindrak** beat **Tommy Dreamer** & **Steven Richards** ... **Mark Henry** pinned **Val Venis** ... **Shane McMahon** defeated **Kane** in a streetfight ... **Ivory** & **Lita** beat **Molly Holly** & **Gail Kim** ... Intercontinental champion **Rob Van Dam** beat **Randy Orton** ... Raw tag team champion **Buh Buh Ray** & **D-Von Dudley** defeated **Rob Conway** & **Rene Dupree** in a table match.
(10-19-03)

—Greg Stevens

MARYLAND

BALTIMORE—WWE No Mercy pay-per-view at the 1st Mariner Arena: Cruiserweight champion **Tajiri** pinned **Rey Misterio Jr.** after **Jimmy Yang** & **Ryan Sakoda** interfered ... **Chris Benoit** defeated **A-Train** by submission ... **Zach Gowen** pinned **Matt Hardy** ... **The Basham Brothers** defeated **Bradshaw** & **Ron Simmons** ... **Vince McMahon** defeated **Stephanie McMahon** in a no-disqualification "I Quit" match when **Linda McMahon** threw in the towel for Stephanie while Vince was choking her out with a metal pipe ... **Kurt Angle** defeated **John Cena** by submission ... **The Big Show** pinned U.S. champion **Eddie Guerrero** to win the title ... Smackdown champion **Brock Lesnar** pinned **The Undertaker** in a biker chain match after **Vince McMahon** interfered.
(10-19-03)

—Frank Krewda

MASSACHUSETTS

METHUEN—Chaotic Wrestling at the Knights of Columbus Hall: **Adam Booker** beat **Frankie Armadillo** ... **Dr. Reginald Heresy** beat **Andre Lyonz** ... **Handsome Johnny** beat **Brian Buffet** ... Tag team champions **Brian Black** & **The Mighty Mini** beat **Peter Mulloy** & **Matthew Evagrius** ... **Kenn Phoenix** beat **Dukes Dalton** ... **Arch Kincaid** won a four-way match over **Vince Vicallo**, **Luis Ortiz**, and heavyweight champion **Billy Kryptonite** to capture the title.
(10-04-03)

—Rich Palladino

MICHIGAN

WARREN—Xtreme Intense Championship Wrestling at the Hot Rocks Sports Bar & Music Cafe: **Danny Daniels** beat **Jimmy Jacobs** in a best-of-three-falls match to become the cruiserweight champ ... **Jimmy Shalwin** defeated **Kamikaze** ... **Gutter** defeated **Joey Pink** ... **Devil Dawg** & **Eddie Venom** defeated **Ice Cold** & **Don Crisis** ... **Malcom Monroe** defeated **Jaimy Coxxx** to become half-owner of XICW ... **Scott Stevens** defeated **Anthony Rivera** ... **Ryan Boz** won a three-way dance against **Frankie the Face** and **Mr. Insanity** ... **Jaimy Coxxx** & **Alex Shelly** defeated **Silas Young** & **Gavin Starr** to become the tag team champs... **The D.B.A.** defeated **Deranged** and **Mike T.S.G.** in a three-way dance to become the Xtreme champ.
(10-12-03)

—Aaron McMann

WARREN—Independent Wrestling Revolution at the YMCA: **Anthony Rivera** defeated **Terry Stevens** ... **Klunk the Klown** defeated **Jaimy Coxxx** ... **Stevie Lee** defeated **Eddie Venom** ... **Brian Ireland** beat **Kamikaze** ... **Andy Muscat** defeated **Tommy Johnson** ... **Deranged** won a three-way falls-count-anywhere match against **Mr. Insanity** and **Krazy** ... **Tracy Brooks** defeated **Badunk-A-Dunk** ... **Elvis Elliot** & **The Original Sinn** won a three-way match against **Jimmy Jacobs** & **Gavin Starr** and **Bobby Bambino** & **Jimmy Shalwin** to become the tag team champs... **Frankie the Face** defeated **Breyer Wellington** to become the King of the Indies champ ... **Gutter** defeated **Conrad Kennedy III** in a dog-collar match ... Heavyweight champion **N8 Mattson** defeated **Jimmy Jacobs**.
(09-27-03)

—Aaron McMann

PITTSFORD—Championship International Wrestling at the High School: **Brad Anderson** defeated **Gary Dawson** to become the U.S. champ ... **Jayson Yang** defeated **Big Chuck Wagon** ... **Pete Christie** defeated **P.J. Flowers** ... **Mr. Main Event** defeated **Doink the Clown** ... Heavyweight champion **Scott Magnum** defeated **Elvis Elliot** in a casket match ... **Mayhem** & **Hoss Monahan** defeated **Dave Dupont**, **Ricco Rodriguez**, & **Buff Bagwell**.
(10-11-03)

—Aaron McMann

MINNESOTA

GOODLAND—Range Pro Wrestling at the Municipal Center: **Baldy** beat **Dark Wolf** ... **Tommy 2 Tone** beat **Male Practice** ... **Panama Kid** defeated **Fat Jay** ... **Steve Stardom** beat **Havoc** ... **El Vato** defeated **Vegas** ... **Tommy 2 Tone** won a 10-man battle royal.
(10-18-03)

—Tom Burdick

COTTAGE GROVE—Neo Pro Wrestling at the Armory: **John Johnson** beat **Neo Dragon** ... **Pete**

Huge beat **Joey E** to win the cruiserweight title ... **Logan Lasher** beat **Mason Quinn** in a garbage can match ... **Kaos** beat **Dysfunction** and **Eric Marx** in a triple threat match ... **Shimdog** beat **Justin Lee** ... **Pretty Boy Delgado** beat **Horace the Psychopath**.
(10-11-03)

—Nicholas Loken

MISSOURI

WALNUT GROVE—World League Wrestling at the Walnut Grove High School: ... **Brandon Groom** defeated **T-Money** ... **Marc Sterling** defeated **Tim Warcloud** ... **Superstar Steve** defeated **Wade Chism** ... **T-Money** & **Miss Natural** defeated **Brandon Groom** & **Summer Rain** ... **Trevor Rhodes** defeated **Mason Hunter**.
(10-04-03)

—David M. Hunter, 2Lt, USAF

OVERLAND—Gateway Championship Wrestling at Wild Acres Gym: **The Party Animals** won a three-way tag team match against **Team Trainee** and **Night Breed** ... **Chaz Wesson** defeated **Jeremy** ... **Super Electro** defeated **Crocodile Kid** ... **Outtkast** defeated **Makaze** ... **Kevin Sharp** defeated **Matt Sydal** ... **Pete Madden** & **Jack Adonis** defeated **Johnny Greenpeace** & **Daizee Haze** ... Light heavyweight champion **Ms. Chif** defeated **Ian Storm** ... **Kory Twist** defeated **Delirious** and **Dingo** in a three-way dance.
(09-26-03)

—Dorian Sinclair

NEW HAMPSHIRE

MANCHESTER—WWE at the Verizon Wireless Arena: Intercontinental champion **Rob Van Dam** pinned **Scott Steiner** ... **Val Venis** defeated **Steven Richards** ... **Ivory** & **Lita** beat **Molly Holly** & **Gail Kim** ... **Mark Henry** defeated **Tommy Dreamer** ... Raw tag team champions **Buh Buh Ray** & **D-Von Dudley** beat **Rob Conway** & **Rene Dupree** ... **Lance Storm** defeated **Rico** ... **Shane McMahon** beat **Kane** in a streetfight ... **Booker T** & **Bill Goldberg** beat **Triple-H** & **Randy Orton**.
(10-17-03)

—Andrea Roddick

NEW JERSEY

TRENTON—WWE at the Sovereign Bank Arena: Smackdown tag team champions **Eddie** & **Chavo Guerrero Jr.** beat **The Basham Brothers** ... **Paul London**, **Orlando Jordan**, & **Spanky** beat **Chuck Palumbo**, **Johnny Stamboli**, & **Nunzio** ... **Charlie Haas** beat **Billy Kidman** ... Smackdown champion **Brock Lesnar** defeated **Kurt Angle** and **John Cena** in a three-way match ... Cruiserweight champion **Tajiri** beat **Rey Misterio Jr.** ... **Bradshaw** pinned **Rhyno** ... **Torrie Wilson** beat **Sable**, **Nidia**, and **Dawn Marie** in a bikini challenge ... **Chris Benoit** defeated **A-Train**.
(10-06-03)

—Keith Cummings

WEST PATERSON—IWF at the IWF Arena: Junior heavyweight champion **Dan McGuire** won a fatal four-way against **Alicia**, **Jay Blaze**, and **Dylan Black**... **Kevin Knight** beat **Brandon Young** ... **Tyler Mann** defeated **Tony Torres** ... American champion **Shawn Donavan** beat **Travis Blake** in a lumberjack match ... **Aaron Stride** pinned **Vik Voorhees** ... Tag team champions **Pierce St. John** & **Shane O'Brien** beat **Fred Sampson** & **Biggie Biggs**.
(09-27-03)

—Dorothy Podsvirow

NEW YORK

WHITE PLAINS—WWE at the Westchester County Center: **Billy Kidman**, **Paul London**, & **Spanky** beat **Chuck Palumbo**, **Nunzio**, & **Johnny Stamboli** ... **Zach Gowen** & **Orlando Jordan** defeated **Matt Hardy** & **Shannon Moore** ... Cruiserweight champion **Tajiri** beat **Rey Misterio Jr.** ... **A-Train** & **Sean O'Haire** defeated **Jamie Noble** & **Ultimo Dragon** ... **Dawn Marie** pinned **Torrie Wilson** ... U.S. champion **The Big Show** pinned **Eddie Guerrero** ... **Bradshaw** & **Ron Simmons** defeated **Shelton Benjamin** & **Charlie Haas** and **The Basham Brothers** in an elimination match ... **Chavo Guerrero Jr.** pinned **Rhyno** ... **Kurt Angle** & **Chris Benoit** beat **John Cena** & **Brock Lesnar**.
(10-20-03)

—Matt Brock

ROCHESTER—Rochester Pro Wrestling at the Kayfabe Dojo: ***Tournament for the vacant heavyweight title, semifinal matches:*** **Kid Justice** defeated **Ian Decay** ... **Rik Matrix** defeated **Jason Atlas** ... ***Finals:*** Justice pinned Matrix to win the title .. ***Tournament for the vacant tag team trophy, semifinal matches:*** **Big 'N' Tasty** defeated **Hellcat** & **Big Cat** ... **The Amazing Technicolor Dreamboats** defeated **Sweet Lou** & **The Canadian Thriller** ... ***Finals:*** The Dreamboats defeated Big 'N' Tasty in a ladder match to win the trophy ... ***Non-tournament matches:*** **Eric Everlast** won a $10,000, 18-man battle royal ... **J.C. Money** won a three-way match against **Spazz** and **Gabriel Saint** to win the light heavyweight title ... **Steve Kruze** won a four-way match against **Dicky Sanchez**, **Charisma**, and **Fusion** to win the TV title.
(10-04-03)

—Todd Brantley

DEER PARK—New York Wrestling Connection at the Community Center: **Ken Scampi** beat **"Disturbed" Damian Dragon** ... **Guillotine LeGrande** beat **Mike Tobin** ... **Silvaman** beat **Armand DeMuerto** ... **John Curse** beat **Don Jeremy** ... **Tyler Payne** & **Ru Starr** beat tag team champs **Wayne** & **Mikey Whipwreck** to win the title ... **Ru Starr** won an invitational battle royal to win the interstate championship ... **Dickie Rodz** defeated **Rob Eckos** ... Heavyweight champion **Tyler Payne** defeated **Tony Burma** by disqualification ... Light heavyweight champion **Johnny Ova** won a three-way TLC match against **Dan Barry** and **Grim Reefer**.
(09-27-03)

—Sondra Innes

BINGHAMTON—WWE at the Broome County Veterans Arena: **Matt Hardy** & **Shannon Moore** beat **Paul London** & **Spanky** ... **Nunzio** pinned **Funaki** ... **Charlie Haas** beat **Orlando Jordan** ... **The Basham Brothers** defeated **Jamie Noble** & **Ultimo Dragon** ... Smackdown champion **Brock Lesnar** defeated **The Big Show** and **The Undertaker** in a three-way match ... Cruiserweight champion **Rey Misterio Jr.** beat **Tajiri** ... **Chris Benoit** & **Billy Kidman** defeated **A-Train** & **Rhyno** ... **Torrie Wilson** beat **Dawn Marie** and **Sable** in a tiny teddy contest ... U.S. champion **Eddie Guerrero** defeated **John Cena**.
(09-21-03)

—Adam Lane

NEW YORK—WWE at Madison Square Garden: **Chris Benoit** defeated **The Big Show** by submission ... **Matt Hardy** & **Shannon Moore** beat **Paul London** & **Spanky** ... **Funaki** pinned **Nunzio** ... **The Basham Brothers** beat **Jamie Noble** & **Ultimo Dragon** ... **A-Train** pinned **Orlando Jordan** ... Cruiserweight champion **Rey Misterio Jr.** pinned **Tajiri** ... **Charlie Haas** defeated **Billy Kidman** ... U.S. champion **Eddie Guerrero** beat **John Cena** and **Rhyno** in a three-way match ... **Torrie Wilson** beat **Sable** and **Dawn Marie** in a tiny teddy contest ... Smackdown champion **Brock Lesnar** defeated **The Undertaker** in a steel cage match.
(09-20-03)

—Dominick Valenti

NORTH CAROLINA

WINSTON-SALEM—New Empire Wrestling at the VFW Hall: **Ravishing Ritchie** & **Pure Playa** defeated **Tony Lane** & **Kid SinSation** ... **Max Cortez** pinned **Jack Mack** ... **Grease** pinned **Rob McBride** ... National champion **J-Money** pinned **Corey Edsel** ... **Brass Munkey**, **American Steel Ninja**, & **GeeStar** defeated **Brad Stutts**, **Matt Houston**, & **Kurt Solo**.
(10-12-03)

—Grant Sawyer

Ekmo (formerly Jamal in WWE) is finding that he can tear apart some of his opponents, including perhaps Shark Boy, within, say, about three minutes!

Doesn't it seem like there's always a little blood trickling from The Sandman's forehead, even if his opponent gets in as little offense as David Young managed on this evening?

BURLINGTON—CWF/FWA-Carolinas at the Carolina Sports Arena: **Otto Schwanz** pinned **Joey Silvia** ... **Sean Powers** pinned **Mitch Norris** ... **Ric Converse** pinned **Rob McBride** ... **Matt Houston** & **Kurt Solo** defeated **Brass Munkey** & **American Steel Ninja** ... Rising Generation league champion **Xsiris** pinned **Kid Justice** ... Tag team champions **Brad Rainz** & **Brad Attitude** defeated **L.A. Cash** & **J-Money** ... **C.W. Anderson** & **Corey Edsel** defeated **Drake Tungsten** & **Hugh B. Johnson**.
(10-11-03)

—Grant Sawyer

HENDERSONVILLE—Southern Wrestling Alliance at the National Guard Armory: **Will Snapp** beat **Pure Player** ... **Tormente Law** beat **Tatoo** & **Judge Stone** ... **Morbid** beat **Bull Dyke** ... **Phil Shatter** beat **Brock** & **Ash Phoenix** in a handicap match ... **Rex Rumble**, **Jeremy V**, & **Brandon P** beat **Dillion Rage**, **Rainman**, & **Mikael Adrian**... **Dynamite Kid** beat **Scotty Smooth** to win the lightweight title ... **Dr. Feelgood** & **Mike Pain** beat **Kenny V** & **Abel Atoms** by disqualification.
(10-11-03)

—Danny Parris

PFAFFTOWN—United Pro Wrestling Coalition at the West Central Community Center ... **Big Daddy Cole** defeated **Kamikaze Kid** ... **Ouga Bouga** defeated **Justin Feeche** ... **Crash Test** & **Grease** defeated **Aaron Devil** & **Steve Michaels** ... Carolina champion **Mr. Smooth** defeated **James Reno** and **Damien Storm** ... **Chuck King** defeated **Rob McBride** ... Tag team champs **Wild Eyed Southern Boys** defeated **Crybaby Chris** & **Aries** ... Heavyweight champion **Thunder** defeated **American Shadow**.
(10-04-03)

—Tara Rheaume

WILMINGTON—Atlantic Coast Championship Wrestling at Riverfest: **Leo Allure** beat **Nick Diamond** ... **Craig Carnage** beat **Biscuit** and **Glen Falls** in a triangle match ... **Lotus** beat **Gluteus Maximus** ... **John Thundercloud** beat **Timber** by disqualification ... **The Stro** beat **Craig Carnage** ... **Lotus** beat **La Fletcha** ... **Flex Fenom** beat **Leo Allure** ... **John Thundercloud** & **Dave Renegade** beat **Timber** & **Gluteus Maximus** ... **The Stro** & **La Fletcha** beat **Craig Carnage** & **Biscuit**.
(10-04-03)

—John Medlin

CRESWELL—Christian Wrestling Federation at the Fall Fair: **Caprice Coleman** wrestled **Shiloh** to a no-contest ... **Caprice Coleman** & **Shiloh** wrestled **Scottie Wrenn** & **Larry Green** to a double-disqualification ... **Chris Ward** defeated light heavyweight champion **Mace** to win the title ... **Shiloh** & **Caprice Coleman** won a handicap match against **Larry Green**, **Scottie Wrenn**, and **Chris Idol**.
(09-27-03)

—Travis McKeon

GREENVILLE—WWE at Minges Coliseum: Cruiserweight champion **Rey Misterio Jr.** defeated **Tajiri** ... **A-Train** & **Sean O'Haire** beat **Paul London** & **Spanky** ... **Nunzio** defeated **Funaki** ... **Matt Hardy** pinned **Orlando Jordan** ... **Billy Kidman** & **Jamie Noble** beat **The Basham Brothers** ... Smackdown champion **Kurt Angle** defeated **Brock Lesnar** ... Smackdown tag team champions **Shelton Benjamin** & **Charlie Haas** beat **Bradshaw** & **Ron Simmons** ... **Torrie Wilson** defeated **Sable**, **Dawn Marie**, and **Nidia** in a bikini challenge ... U.S. champion **Eddie Guerrero** defeated **Chris Benoit**, **John Cena**, and **Rhyno** in a four-way match.
(09-15-03)

—Evan Lawrence

ASHEVILLE—WWE at the Civic Center: **The Hurricane** & **Rosey** defeated **Tommy Dreamer** & **Steven Richards** ... **Lance Storm** pinned **Rico** ... **Mark Henry** & **Rodney Mack** beat **Garrison Cade** & **Mark Jindrak** ... **Maven** pinned **Test** ... Women's champion **Molly Holly** beat **Trish Stratus** ... **Buh Buh Ray** & **D-Von Dudley** beat **Rob Conway** & **Rene Dupree** in a table match ... Intercontinental champion **Christian** defeated **Chris Jericho** and **Val Venis** ... Raw champion **Triple-H** defeated **Ric Flair** ... **Rob Van Dam** defeated **Kane** in a steel cage match.
(09-14-03)

—Jeff Whiting

NORTH DAKOTA

FARGO—WWE at the Fargo Dome: **Spike Dudley** pinned **Rico** ... **Test** defeated **Tommy Dreamer** ... **Mark Henry** & **Rodney Mack** beat **The Hurricane** & **Rosey** ... **Randy Orton** pinned **Lance Storm** ... Raw tag team champions **Buh Buh Ray** & **D-Von Dudley** defeated **Rob Conway** & **Rene Dupree** in a table match ... Intercontinental champion **Christian** pinned **Rob Van Dam** ... **Trish Stratus** & **Lita** defeated **Jacquelyn** & **Victoria** ... **Shane McMahon** defeated **Kane** in a streetfight.
(09-26-03)

—Jason Utley

OHIO

EASTLAKE—New Era Pro Wrestling at Sneakee Pete's Bar and Grille: **The Bouncer** wrestled **J.T. Lightning** to a double-countout ... **J-Ru** defeated **Jason Turner** ... **The Shooting Stars** defeated **Aero** & **Shawn Blaze** ... **Canadian Bad Boy** defeated **Chuck Brody** ... **The Deviant**, **Perry Greene**, & **Jay Violence** defeated **J-Rocc**, **Adam Cage**, & **DisCole Fever** in an elimination match.
(10-06-03)

—Jerry Morris

ELYRIA—Power Championship Wrestling at the High School: **The Rebel** pinned **J-Ice** in a "loser-eats-dog-food" match ... **Billy Maverick** defeated **King Paul** ... **Eric Draven** beat **Tommy Green** in a table match ... **Stacy Starr** & **Brandon Hunter** beat **The Super Clowns** by countout ... **Phobia** pinned **Terrance Allen** in a scaffold match ... **Andy Muscat** won a 12-man battle royal.
(10-04-03)

—Morty Wilkenstein

OKLAHOMA

OKLAHOMA CITY—New Mid-South Wrestling at the AMC Flea Market: **Brad Michaels** beat **Anthony Wayne** ... **Chaz Sharpe** defeated **Heffe Sanchez** ... **Dexter Hardaway** & **Luc Lapointe** beat **Cruise Control** ... **Tyler Bateman** beat **XCAL** ... **Viper** defeated **Chris Matthews** ... **Slash** & **Damian** beat **The New Family** ... Heavyweight champion **Michael Faith** beat **Tarantula**.
(10-03-03)

—Dawayne Capshew

PENNSYLVANIA

ALTOONA—Keystone Championship Wrestling at the KCW Arena: **Charisma** pinned **Kid Justice** ... **Youth Gone Wild** defeated tag team champs **Xtreme** in a ladder match to win the title ... **Doug Diggler** & **Eric Roberts** defeated **Bill Bain** & **Scott Fowler** ... **Mercury Flash** defeated Central Pennsylvania champ **Kidd Country** in a bullrope match to win the title ... **Matt Vandal** pinned **Zubov** in a streetfight ... **Dr. Feelgood** defeated **Hubert Boy II** ... **Sebastian** defeated **The Sandman** and hardcore champ **Charlie Mansun** to win the title ... **Kasanova Kato** defeated heavyweight champ **Big Lenny** in a no-disqualification match to win the title.
(10-11-03)

—Matt Bish

McKEESPORT—NWA East at the Sportatorium: **Brandon K** pinned **Darron Smythe** ... **Dash Bennett** beat **Ryan Spade**... **Justin Idol** defeated NWA Superstars champion **Biggie Biggs** by disqualification ... **Paul Atlas** beat **Jason Cage** ... **Devin Devine** defeated **Mad Mike** ... Tag team champions **Quinn Magnum** & **Scottie Gash** beat **Chris Taylor** & **Lance Dayton** ... NWA East champion **Nikita Allanov** beat NWA National champion **Ricky Murdoch** by disqualification.
(10-11-03)

—Dorothy Podsvirow

PHILADELPHIA—Combat Zone Wrestling at Viking Hall: **Mercedes Martinez** defeated **Summer** ... **Chris Cash** won a three-way dance against **Cory Kastle** and **Jun-She the Kabuki Kid** ... **Niles Young** & **Jude** defeated **Adam Flash** & **Ian Knoxx** and **Nick Berk** & **Z-Barr** in a three-way dance ... **D.J. Hyde** defeated **Jon Dahmer** ... **Deranged** beat **Azrieal** ... **Jimmy Rave** defeated **Tony Ma-**

maluke in a 20-minute "Ironman" match ... **Sabian & Bianca** defeated **Mercedes Martinez & Joker** ... Junior heavyweight champion **Ruckus** beat **Derek Frazier** ... **B-Boy** defeated **Homicide** ... IWA Mid-South light heavyweight champion **Sonjay Dutt** defeated **Alex Shelley, Jimmy Jacobs**, and **Trent Acid** ... BJW death match champ **Nate Hatred** defeated **Nick Gage** in a dog-collar match.
(10-11-03)

—Timothy Collins

PHILADELPHIA—Urban Empire Wrestling at the Blue Horizon: **Mike Quackenbush, Gran Akuma, Icarus, & Ultramantis** defeated **The Wild Cards & The Conundrum** ... ***Tournament to declare a heavyweight champion, quarterfinals:*** **Qenaan Creed** defeated **2 Dope** ... **Julio Dinero** pinned **Mike Quackenbush** ... **Sonny Siaki** defeated **Xavier** ... **Ruckus** defeated **Sonjay Dutt** ... ***Semifinals:*** Creed & Siaki defeated Ruckus & Dinero in a four-way single elimination match... ***Finals:*** Creed defeated Siaki.
(10-04-03)

—Bill Wonderlick

GILBERTSVILLE—World Wide Wrestling Alliance at Zern's Farmers' Market: **D.J. Danzar** defeated **Arkham** ... **Slambo the Clown** beat **JoJo** ... **Johnny Law** defeated **Mark Manson** ... **Summer Heat** defeated **Sweet Inspiration** ... **Bodacious Brad** beat **Dreamcatcher** ... **Glen Osbourne** defeated **Heartbreaker** ... **Demetrious Arion** beat **Harley Lewis**.
(10-04-03)

—Alexandria Abrams

ALLENTOWN—CHIKARA at St. John's Auditorium: **Rorschach** beat **Jolly Roger** in a Young Lions Cup qualifying match ... **Mister ZERO** beat **Blind Rage** by countout ... **Private Eye** pinned **Darkness Crabtree** ... **Super Orka** pinned **Silver Wing** ... Young Lions Cup champion **Hallowicked** beat **UltraMantis** ... **Mike Quackenbush, Gran Akuma, & Icarus** defeated **Eddie Kingston, Blackjack Marciano, & Jigsaw** in a best-of-three-falls match.
(09-27-03)

—Timothy A. Walker

BETHLEHEM—WWE at Stabler Arena: **Matt Hardy & Shannon Moore** defeated **Paul London & Spanky** ... **Orlando Jordan** pinned **Nunzio** ... **The Basham Brothers** beat **Jamie Noble & Ultimo Dragon** ... **Chris Benoit** defeated **A-Train** ... Smackdown champion **Brock Lesnar** beat **The Big Show** and **The Undertaker** in a three-way match ... Cruiserweight champion **Rey Misterio Jr.** pinned **Tajiri** ... **Charlie Haas** defeated **Billy Kidman** ... **Torrie Wilson** beat **Sable** in a tiny teddy contest ... Smackdown tag team champions **Eddie & Chavo Guerrero Jr.** beat **John Cena & Rhyno**.
(09-22-03)

—Tony Marist

HERSHEY—WWE Unforgiven pay-per-view at the Giant Center: **Buh Buh Ray & D-Von Dudley** defeated **Rene Dupree, Sylvan Grenier, & Rob Conway** in a handicap table match. Due to a prematch stipulation, the Dudleys won Dupree & Grenier's Raw tag team title ... **Test** pinned **Scott Steiner** after **Stacy Keibler** accidentally hit him with a chair ... **Randy Orton** pinned **Shawn Michaels** ... **Trish Stratus & Lita** defeated **Molly Holly & Gail Kim** ... **Kane** defeated **Shane McMahon** in a last-man-standing match ... Intercontinental champion **Christian** defeated **Chris Jericho** and **Rob Van Dam** in a three-way match when he pinned Van Dam ... **Jonathan Coachman & Al Snow** beat **Jim Ross & Jerry Lawler** to become the new broadcast team for *Raw* ... **Bill Goldberg** pinned Raw champion **Triple-H** to win the title.
(09-21-03)

—Mark W. Hill

WEST MIFFLIN—International Wrestling Cartel at the CCAC South Campus Gym: **Eric Xtasy** beat **Troy Lords** in a baseball bat match ... **Eric Xtasy** defeated **J.T. Rodgers** by disqualification ... **Jimmy Vegas** pinned **Eric Angle** after **Sterling James Keenan** interfered ... **Dustin Ardine** beat **Fabulous** ... **Matt Stryker** pinned **Super Hentai** ... **Dean Radford** beat **B.J. Whitmer** ... Heavyweight champion **Dennis Gregory** defeated **T. Rantula** ... **Sterling James Keenan** beat **Al B. Damm** ... **The Ring Crew Express** beat tag team champions **The Devil's Advocates** by disqualification ... **Jimmy Jacobs** defeated **Alex Shelley** ... **Carlton Kaz** defeated **Supreme Lee Great**.
(09-13-03)

—Timothy A. Walker

RHODE ISLAND

PROVIDENCE—WWE at the Dunkin Donuts Center: Intercontinental champion **Rob Van Dam** pinned **Scott Steiner** ... **Val Venis** defeated **Steven Richards** ... **Lita & Ivory** beat **Molly Holly & Gail Kim** ... **Mark Henry** pinned **Tommy Dreamer** ... Raw tag team champions **Buh Buh Ray & D-Von Dudley** beat **Rob Conway & Rene Dupree** in a table match ... **Lance Storm** defeated **Rico** ... **Shane McMahon** beat **Kane** in a streetfight ... **Booker T & Bill Goldberg** defeated **Ric Flair & Randy Orton**.
(10-18-03)

—Steve Kass

TENNESSEE

NASHVILLE—NWA-TNA pay-per-view at the Fairgrounds Coliseum: **B.G. James, Ron Killings, & Konnan** beat **Legend, Ekmo, & Sonny Siaki** ... **Kid Kash** pinned **Sonjay Dutt** ... NWA tag team champions **Simon Diamond & Johnny Swinger** beat **Danny Doring & Roadkill** ... NWA-TNA X champion **Michael Shane** defeated **Christopher Daniels** and **Chris Sabin** in a three-way match ... **Raven** pinned **Slash** in a dog-collar match ... **Chris Harris & James Storm** beat **Andy Douglas & Chase Stevens** ... **Jeff Jarrett** pinned NWA heavyweight champion **A.J. Styles** to win the title.
(10-22-03)

—Frank Miller

NASHVILLE—NWA-TNA pay-per-view at the Fairgrounds Coliseum: **Dusty Rhodes, Chris Harris, & James Storm** beat **Ekmo, Sonny Siaki, & Legend** ... NWA-TNA X champion **Michael Shane** pinned **Christopher Daniels** ... **Kevin Northcutt** pinned **Erik Watts** ... **Sonjay Dutt & Eric Young** defeated **El Fuego & Jerrell Clark** ... **Danny Doring & Roadkill** defeated NWA tag team champions **Simon Diamond & Johnny Swinger** in a non-title match ... **Abyss** pinned **Kid Kash** ... **Slash & Vampiro** beat **C.M. Punk & Julio Dinero**.
(10-15-03)

—Frank Miller

NASHVILLE—NWA-TNA pay-per-view at the Fairgrounds Coliseum: **Kevin Northcutt & Ryan Wilson** beat **D-Lo Brown & Chris Vaughn** ... NWA-TNA X champion **Michael Shane** beat **Chris Sabin** ... **Simon Diamond, Glenn Gilberti, & Johnny Swinger** beat **B.G. James, Ron Killings, & Konnan** in an elimination match ... **Christopher Daniels** pinned **Frankie Kazarian** ... **Chris Harris & James Storm** beat **Abyss & Kid Kash** (**Terry Taylor** was the guest referee) ... **Raven** pinned **Sinn** ... NWA heavyweight champion **A.J. Styles** pinned **Dusty Rhodes**.
(10-08-03)

—Will Welsh

NASHVILLE—NWA-TNA pay-per-view at the Fairgrounds Coliseum: **Jerry Lynn** defeated **Chris Sabin, Juventud Guerrera, Frankie Kazarian, and Nosawa** in a five-way elimination match to earn a shot at the X title ... **Rick Santel & Chris Vaughn** beat **Kevin Northcutt & Ryan Wilson** ... **Terry Taylor** pinned **Kid Kash** ... **Jeff Jarrett** pinned **Christopher Daniels** ... **Simon Diamond, Glenn Gilberti, & David Young** defeated **B.G. James, Ron Killings, & Konnan** ... **Dusty Rhodes** wrestled to a no-contest with NWA heavyweight champion **A.J. Styles** in a non-title bunkhouse match ... **Raven, Julio Dinero, & C.M. Punk** beat **Shane Douglas, Sinn, & Slash**.
(09-24-03)

—Harry Burkett

NASHVILLE—NWA-TNA pay-per-view at the Fairgrounds Coliseum: **B.G. James & Ron Killings** defeated **Abyss & Kid Kash, Chris Harris & James Storm**, and **Sinn & Slash** in a four-corners match to earn a shot at the NWA tag team title ... **Sonny Siaki** defeated **D-Lo Brown** in a casket match after **Ekmo** (formerly **Jamal** of WWE's **Three Minute Warning**) interfered ... **Michael Shane, Nosawa, & Chris Sabin** defeated **Juventud Guerrera, Frankie Kazarian, & Eric Young** ... NWA tag team champions **Simon Diamond & Johnny Swinger** beat **Mad Mikey & Shark Boy** ... NWA heavyweight champion **A.J. Styles** pinned **Jerry Lynn** ... **Shane Douglas**

Konnan might have been trying to make Sinn pay for whatever sins he committed against 3 Live Kru by tying him up in knots during a six-man bout.

It was Vampiro who caused Raven to drop a hair match to Shane Douglas earlier in the fall, and Raven always likes to remind his new rival that he hasn't forgotten about it.

pinned **Raven** in a hair vs. hair match after **Vampiro** interfered.
(09-17-03)

—Frank Miller

NASHVILLE—WWE at the Municipal Auditorium: **D-Von** & **Spike Dudley** defeated **Rob Conway** & **Rene Dupree** ... **Garrison Cade** & **Mark Jindrak** defeated **Steven Richards** & **Rico** ... **Mark Henry** & **Rodney Mack** beat **The Hurricane** & **Rosey** ... Women's champion **Molly Holly** beat **Trish Stratus** ... Intercontinental champion **Christian** beat **Chris Jericho** and **Val Venis** in a three-way match ... **Bill Goldberg** & **Maven** beat **Triple-H** & **Randy Orton** ... **Rob Van Dam** defeated **Kane** in a steel cage match (**Jonathan Coachman** was the guest referee).
(09-12-03)

—Frank Miller

CHURCH HILL—Southern States Wrestling at Carter's Valley Elementary School: **Justin Sensation** beat **Dream Machine** ... **Iron Cross** beat **Shawn Spencer** ... **Tony Givens** beat **Super Destroyer** ... **Josh Cody** beat **Beau James** ... **Tony Givens** & **Justin Sensation** beat **Super Destroyer** & **Shawn Spencer**.
(10-04-03)

—Fay Ferguson

KNOXVILLE—WWE at the Thompson/Boling Assembly Arena: **Buh Buh Ray** & **D-Von Dudley** defeated **Rob Conway** & **Rene Dupree** in a table match ... **Mark Henry** & **Rodney Mack** beat **The Hurricane** & **Rosey** ... **Lance Storm** pinned **Rico** ... **Garrison Cade** & **Mark Jindrak** defeated **Tommy Dreamer** & **Steven Richards** ... Women's champion **Molly Holly** pinned **Trish Stratus** ... **Maven** defeated **Test** ... Intercontinental champion **Christian** defeated **Chris Jericho** and **Val Venis** in a three-way match ... Raw champion **Triple-H** beat **Ric Flair** and **Randy Orton** in a three-way match ... **Rob Van Dam** defeated **Kane** in a steel cage match.
(09-13-03)

—Jeff Whiting

TEXAS

ARLINGTON—Professional Championship Wrestling at the PCW Arena: **Mike Foxx** pinned **Brandon Groom**... TV champ **Jared Steele** pinned **Nobe Bryant** ... **G-Slice** won a three-way dance against **J.T. LaMotta** and **Oscar** ... **Mike Foxx** won a TLC match against **Brett Barnes**, **C-Diddy**, **Chris Stevens**, **Justin 2 Fine**, and **Evil E.**
(10-11-03)

—Rob Moore

DENTON—Xtreme Championship Wrestling at the XCW Arena: **Scott Phoenix** beat **Bull** by disqualification ... **Gemini** pinned **Officer Scott** ... TV champion **Bullman Downs** defeated **Bling Bling** ... Heavyweight champion **El Convicto** pinned **Cyclone** ... **Team Extreme**, **Scott Phoenix**, & **Drunk Adam** defeated **The Doom Thugs** & **The Punishers.**
(10-10-03)

—Matt Avery

MANVEL—Warriors of Wrestling at Eddie's Country Ballroom: **Mr. Entertainment** wrestled **Mike Skills** to a time-limit draw ... **Jade** defeated **Killer Katie** ... **Masada** pinned **Fast Eddie** ... **Austin Rhodes** defeated **Major Pest** ... **Chaz Taylor** defeated **Hotstuff Hernandez** ... **Cowboy Dalton** & **Taylor James** beat **The Old School Cowboys**.
(10-03-03)

—M. Anthony

CLEBURNE—Next Generation of Wrestling at the Cleburne Civic Center: **A.J. Dillon** defeated **Terry Black** ... The four-way match between **Rick Davidson**, **John Solo**, **Brent Masters**, and **Lord Fatality** ended in a no-decision ... **Mace** defeated **Brett Bonz** ... **The New Legacy** won a three-way match against **Total Justice** and **The Punishers** ... **Master Chief Hi-Way** won a three-way match over **Pendragon** and **B. Anthony** ... **The New Spoiler** defeated heavyweight champion **Chico Torres** for the title ... **Blade** pinned **David Fuller**.
(09-26-03)

—Travis McKeon

VIRGINIA

NORFOLK—WWE at the Scope: **Maven** & **Trish Stratus** beat **Steven Richards** & **Victoria** ... **The Hurricane** & **Rosey** defeated **Mark Henry** & **Rodney Mack** ... Intercontinental champion **Rob Van Dam** beat **Rico** ... Women's champion **Molly Holly** beat **Lita** (**Jazz** was the guest referee) ... **Lance Storm** & **Val Venis** beat **Garrison Cade** & **Mark Jindrak** ... **Bill Goldberg** & **Shawn Michaels** beat **Ric Flair** & **Randy Orton** ... **Booker T**, **Shane McMahon**, & **Buh Buh Ray**, **D-Von**, & **Spike Dudley** defeated **Christian**, **Chris Jericho**, **Rob Conway**, **Rene Dupree**, & **Sylvan Grenier** in a table match.
(10-11-03)

—Charles Erickson

FREDRICKSBURG—UCW at the Fairgrounds: **Persephone** defeated **Eva Destruction** ... **Persephone** defeated **Neil Sharkey** for the women's title ... Tag team champions **Anarchy Inc.** defeated **Bad Dog** & **Shane Shadows** ... **Fatty McNasty** defeated **Damion Wylde** ... Commonwealth champion **Ellon Hull** defeated **Grail** ... **Shane Shadows** won a battle royal to win the heavyweight championship.
(10-04-03)

—Debbie Sutter

RICHMOND—NWA Virginia at the Blackwell Community Center: ***King of Virginia Tournament, quarterfinals:*** **Brandon Day** pinned **Ryan Spade** ... **Adrian Whisper** defeated **Dirty Money** ... **Sean Lei** pinned **Nikita Allanov** ... **Preston Quinn** beat **Chris Escobar** by countout ... ***Semifinals:*** Whisper defeated Day ... Lei pinned Quinn ... ***Finals:*** Whisper defeated Lei by submission ... ***Non-tournament matches:*** **Dirty Money** won an 11-man battle royal ... Tag team champs **Damian Wayne** & **Mike Booth** defeated **Jay Owens** & **Prince Malik**.
(10-04-03)

—Rick O'Brien

RICHMOND—WWE at the Coliseum: Cruiserweight champion **Rey Misterio Jr.** beat **Tajiri** ... **A-Train** & **Sean O'Haire** beat **Paul London** & **Spanky** ... **Matt Hardy** pinned **Orlando Jordan** ... **Funaki** beat **Nunzio** ... **Torrie Wilson** beat **Sable**, **Nidia**, and **Dawn Marie** in a bikini challenge ... **The Basham Brothers** beat **Billy Kidman** & **Jamie Noble** ... U.S. champion **Eddie Guerrero** beat **Chris Benoit** and **John Cena** in a three-way match ... Smackdown tag team champions **Shelton Benjamin** & **Charlie Haas** beat **Bradshaw** & **Ron Simmons** ... Smackdown champion **Kurt Angle** beat **Brock Lesnar**.
(09-14-03)

—Eddie Jolson

ROANOKE—WWE at the Civic Center: Cruiserweight champion **Rey Misterio Jr.** pinned **Tajiri** ... **A-Train** & **Sean O'Haire** defeated **Paul London** & **Spanky** ... **Matt Hardy** pinned **Orlando Jordan** ... **Nunzio** pinned **Funaki** ... **Billy Kidman** & **Jamie Noble** beat **The Basham Brothers** ... U.S. champion **Eddie Guerrero** defeated **Chris Benoit** and **John Cena** in a three-way match ... Smackdown tag team champions **Shelton Benjamin** & **Charlie Haas** beat **Bradshaw** & **Ron Simmons** ... **Torrie Wilson** beat **Dawn Marie**, **Sable**, and **Nidia** in a bikini challenge ... Smackdown champion **Kurt Angle** defeated **Brock Lesnar**.
(09-13-03)

—Don Furley

WEST VIRGINIA

WHEELING—WWE at the Civic Center: Women's champion **Molly Holly** beat **Lita** ... **The Hurricane** & **Rosey** beat **Garrison Cade** & **Mark Jindrak** ... **Maven** & **Trish Stratus** defeated **Steven Richards** & **Victoria** ... **Bill Gold-**

berg & Shawn Michaels defeated Ric Flair & Randy Orton ... Mark Henry pinned Val Venis ... Intercontinental champion Rob Van Dam defeated Rico ... Booker T, Shane McMahon, & Buh Buh Ray & D-Von Dudley defeated Rob Conway, Rene Dupree, Chris Jericho, & Christian in a table match.
(10-12-03)

—Earl Madsen

INTERNATIONAL

CANADA

HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA—Mainstream Wrestling at the Forum Multi-Purpose Center: ***Maritime Cup Tournament, quarterfinal matches:*** Mike Hughes beat Duke MacIsaac ... Scott Savage beat Sonny Roselli ... Gary Williams defeated Tony Armstrong ... Bobby Rude beat Lincoln Steen ... ***Non-tournament match:*** Legion Cage beat Scott Phoenix ... ***Semifinals:*** Rude beat Williams ... Savage beat Hughes, but Savage suffered a knee injury at the hands of Hughes after the match and thus forfeited his spot in the finals to him ... ***Finals:*** Rude beat Hughes to win the tournament.
(10-12-03)

—Malcolm Brown

CALGARY, ALBERTA—Stampede Wrestling at the Bowness Sportsplex: Randy Myers beat Kirk Melnyk ... Kid Nicholls beat Jason Carter ... Nattie Neidhart beat Belle Lovitz & Dandy Myers in a handicap match ... T.J.Wilson beat Johnny Devine and Duke Durrango by disqualification ... Harry Smith & Apocalypse beat Karnage & Dave Swift.
(10-10-03)

—Steven Hawkes

MONCTON, NEW BRUNSWICK—WWE at the Coliseum: Maven pinned Rodney Mack ... Trish Stratus & Lita beat Molly Holly & Gail Kim (Jazz was the guest referee) ... Lance Storm defeated Test ... Garrison Cade & Mark Jindrak defeated Tommy Dreamer & Steven Richards ... Shane McMahon beat Kane in a streetfight ... Mark Henry pinned Val Venis ... Intercontinental champion Rob Van Dam pinned Randy Orton ... Raw tag team champions Buh Buh Ray & D-Von Dudley beat Rob Conway & Rene Dupree in a table match.
(10-05-03)

—Martin Leeds

ST. JOHN'S, NEWFOUNDLAND—WWE at Mile One Arena: Maven beat Rodney Mack ... Trish Stratus & Lita defeated Molly Holly & Gail Kim (Jazz was the guest referee) ... Lance Storm pinned Test ... Garrison Cade & Mark Jindrak beat Tommy Dreamer & Steven Richards ... Shane McMahon beat Kane in a streetfight ... Mark Henry pinned Val Venis ... Intercontinental champion Rob Van Dam pinned Randy Orton ... Raw tag team champions Buh Buh Ray & D-Von Dudley beat Rob Conway & Rene Dupree in a table match.
(10-04-03)

—Mike Dempsey

GUELPH, ONTARIO—WWE at the Sports & Entertainment Centre: Maven defeated Rodney Mack ... Trish Stratus & Lita beat Gail Kim & Molly Holly ... Lance Storm pinned Test ... Garrison Cade & Mark Jindrak beat Tommy Dreamer & Steven Richards ... Shane McMahon defeated Kane in a streetfight ... Mark Henry beat Val Venis ... Intercontinental champion Rob Van Dam pinned Randy Orton ... Raw tag team champions Buh Buh Ray & D-Von Dudley beat Rob Conway & Rene Dupree in a table match.
(10-03-03)

—Matt Brock

BRANDON, MANITOBA—WWE at the Keystone Centre: Chris Benoit defeated John Cena ... Jamie Noble beat Nunzio ... Orlando Jordan pinned Rhyno ... Matt Hardy & Shannon Moore beat Paul London & Spanky ... Bradshaw pinned A-Train ... Smackdown tag team champions Eddie & Chavo Guerrero Jr. beat The Basham Brothers ... Cruiserweight champion Tajiri pinned Rey Misterio Jr. ... Shaniqua beat Dawn Marie & Nidia in a handicap match ... Smackdown champion Brock Lesnar defeated Kurt Angle.
(09-28-03)

—Pat Bell

WINNIPEG, MANITOBA—WWE at the Winnipeg Arena: Chris Benoit defeated John Cena ... Nunzio pinned Jamie Noble ... Rhyno defeated Orlando Jordan ... Bradshaw pinned A-Train ... Matt Hardy & Shannon Moore beat Paul London & Spanky ... Smackdown tag team champions Eddie & Chavo Guerrero Jr. beat The Basham Brothers ... Cruiserweight champion Tajiri beat Rey Misterio Jr. ... Shaniqua beat Dawn Marie & Nidia in a handicap match ... Smackdown champion Brock Lesnar pinned Kurt Angle.
(09-27-03)

—Frank Krewda

ENGLAND

MANCHESTER—WWE at the Manchester Evening News Arena: Chris Benoit defeated A-Train ... Rey Misterio Jr. & Ultimo Dragon beat Nunzio & Tajiri ... Rhyno pinned Jamie Noble ... Shelton Benjamin & Charlie Haas beat Billy Kidman & Funaki ... Smackdown tag team champions Eddie & Chavo Guerrero Jr. beat The Basham Brothers ... The Big Show defeated Matt Hardy ... Torrie Wilson defeated Sable, Dawn Marie, and Nidia in a bikini challenge ... Kurt Angle & The Undertaker beat John Cena & Brock Lesnar.
(10-12-03)

—John Rainford

BIRMINGHAM—WWE at the National Exhibition Centre: U.S. champion Eddie Guerrero defeated Rhyno ... A-Train pinned Matt Hardy ... Funaki beat Ultimo Dragon and Nunzio in a three-way match ... Chavo Guerrero Jr. beat Charlie Haas ... Billy Kidman & Jamie Noble beat The Basham Brothers ... Cruiserweight champion Tajiri beat Rey Misterio Jr. ... Kurt Angle & Chris Benoit beat The Big Show & John Cena ... Torrie Wilson defeated Nidia, Dawn Marie, and Sable in a bikini challenge ... Smackdown champion Brock Lesnar defeated The Undertaker.
(10-11-03)

—John Rainford

TEWKESBURY—ESEW at Wotson Memorial Hall: Sam Daniels pinned E.C.J. ... Shawn the Man pinned Coalminer III ... The Bull beat Kid Kandy and Chris Carrs in a three-way match ... Coalminer D pinned Jonny the Body ... Shawn the Man & Jonny the Body beat The Coalminers and Cage & Sam Daniels in a three-way match to win the tag team title ... UK champion Kiran?mistry beat The Bull.
(09-27-03)

—John Stallard

FINLAND

TURKU—WWE at Turkuhalli Elysee Arena: Matt Hardy pinned A-Train ... Ultimo Dragon defeated Funaki and Nunzio in a three-way match ... Charlie Haas defeated Chavo Guerrero Jr. ... Billy Kidman & Jamie Noble beat The Basham Brothers ... Torrie Wilson beat Sable, Nidia, and Dawn Marie in a bikini challenge ... U.S. champion Eddie Guerrero pinned Rhyno ... Cruiserweight champion Tajiri beat Rey Misterio Jr. ... Kurt Angle & Chris Benoit defeated The Big Show & John Cena ... Smackdown champion Brock Lesnar pinned The Undertaker.
(10-09-03)

—William Carlsen

GERMANY

COLOGNE—WWE at the Cologne Arena: Chris Benoit defeated A-Train ... Rey Misterio Jr. & Ultimo Dragon defeated Nunzio & Tajiri ... Charlie Haas beat Jamie Noble ... Rhyno defeated Funaki ... Smackdown tag team champions Eddie & Chavo Guerrero Jr. beat The Basham Brothers ... Matt Hardy beat The Big Show ... Torrie Wilson beat Nidia, Sable, and Dawn Marie in a bikini challenge ... Kurt Angle & The Undertaker defeated John Cena & Brock Lesnar.
(10-10-03)

—Kirk Mueller

NWA heavyweight champ A.J. Styles was anxious to get his hands on Dusty Rhodes during a tag team match. Fortunately for him, he saved some rage and fury for Jeff Jarrett.

PWI classic
From the November 1995 issue of *Inside Wrestling*

From Snapping Necks To Cashing Checks?

THE MILLION-DOLLAR RECRUITMENT OF CHRIS BENOIT

With one grotesque motion, ECW's Chris Benoit got the attention of power broker Ted DiBiase and may have dramatically increased his fortunes—as a WWF rulebreaker!

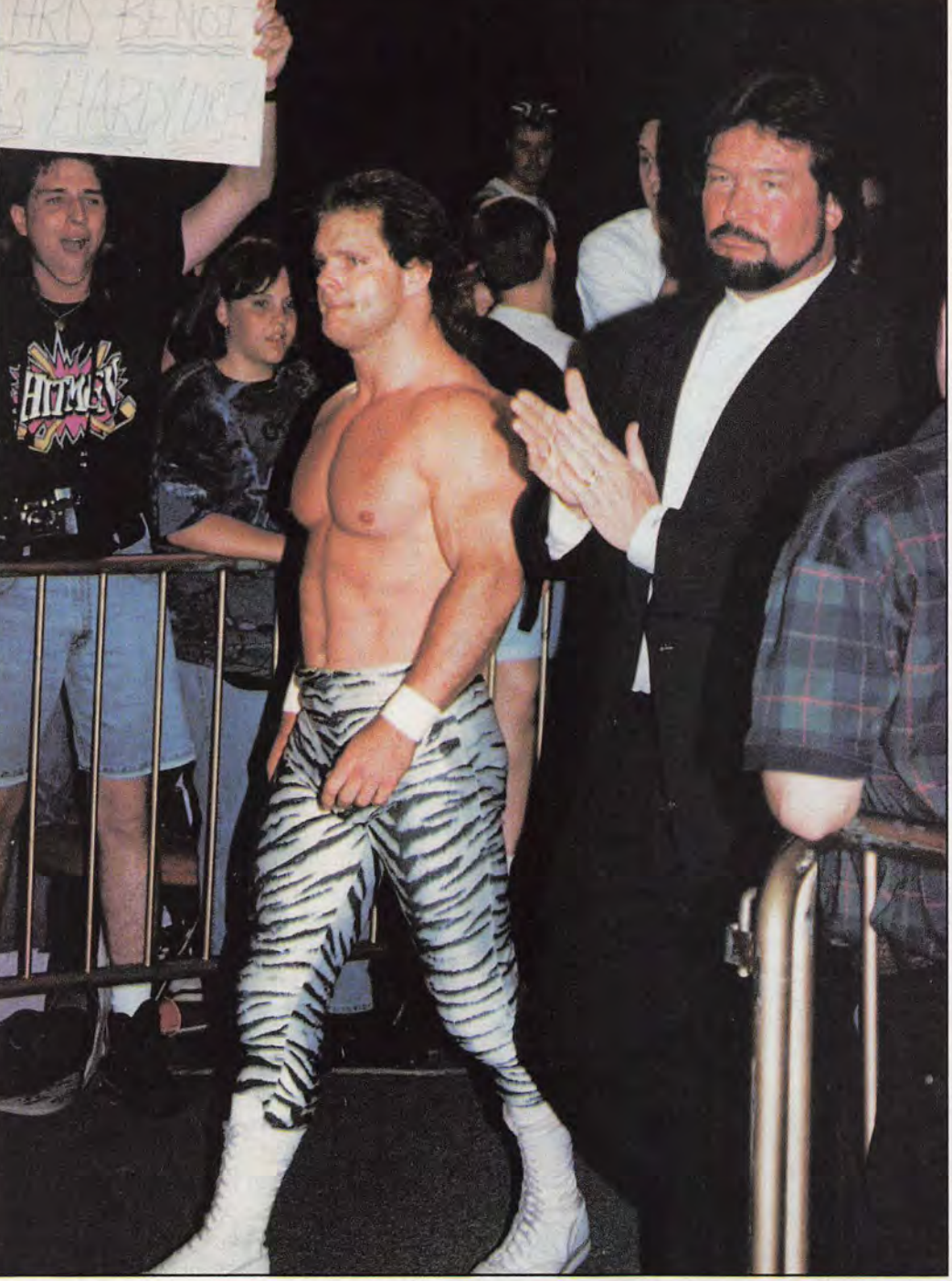
By Chris Bernucca

"GIMME A BREAK!" has been the complaint of Chris Benoit ever since he arrived on the American wrestling scene. Apparently he has finally gotten one—by giving one himself.

If you read the small print of results in PRO WRESTLING ILLUSTRATED'S "Arena Reports," you may have noticed that Benoit made his WWF debut at television tapings in June. It was nothing he will care to remember. Benoit wrestled three matches, losing to Sparky Plugg, Owen Hart, and Adam Bomb.

The second loss, to Bomb, was pretty unmemorable, save for the fact that Benoit had the corner support of none other than Ted DiBiase. When the head of The Million-Dollar Corporation and the most influential manager in the WWF is by your side, you turn a few heads, win or lose.

"Yeah, what was up with that?" asked one WWF fan favorite. "I had



Ted DiBiase walked to the ring with Chris Benoit at a WWF TV taping in June 1995. It was strange because months earlier, the only ECW star he envisioned himself signing for his Corporation was Sabu.

barely heard of the guy and there's DiBiase at his side like a bodyguard or something. Is there anybody in wrestling he *hasn't* tried to put the touch on?"

Apparently not. DiBiase's appearance at ringside was the culmination of a recruitment that was both long and lucky. Many view DiBiase as a slimy character, but his tentacles reach far and possess a powerful grip.

But it was not Benoit whom DiBiase was looking to lock up. The journeyman may have arrived in the WWF with a purpose, but how he got there was quite by accident. It all started last November 5 at an ECW card in Philadelphia. It is no secret that the major federations—the WWF and WCW—are constantly raiding regional promotions for new talent. They lure wrestlers with the promise of big paychecks, merchandising royalties, and national TV exposure.

"When you come right down to it, smaller promotions are a tremendous source for the WWF and WCW," said USWA promoter Jerry Jarrett. "Keeping a smaller promotion stocked with talent is the toughest job in this sport, because you're always in danger of losing your best people to the big guys."

DiBiase had sent a henchman on a foray to Philadelphia; "The Million-Dollar Man" was looking for an addition to his Corporation. He had his eyes on Sabu, who was making quite a name for himself with his daredevil ways.

"I can't say I remember a guy dressed in a real expensive suit being at that card, because he's here so much, I lose track," said The Sandman. "He doesn't call attention to himself, but he lets us know that he's in the house. I heard from a bunch of guys that he works for DiBiase. He always stands at the back of the crowd and takes notes. Guys turn it up a notch when he's here."

The word of DiBiase's associate's presence made its way to Benoit, who has long been projected as a superstar but come up just short. Benoit's career began in Canada and had taken him to Japan and Europe, among other places. He competed in WCW in 1992 and 1993, and by the time he left, he was a bitter man.

Benoit landed in ECW and was scheduled to take on Sabu on November 5. Knowing Camp DiBiase would be watching, Benoit wrestled the match of his life. He

The Sandman

ratings

November 1995

TOP 15
1. Hulk Hogan
2. Diesel
3. Sting
4. Randy Savage
5. Shawn Michaels
6. Bret Hart
7. Jeff Jarrett
8. Adam Bomb
9. Savio Vega
10. The Sandman
11. Ric Flair
12. Mabel
13. Razor Ramon
14. The Renegade
15. The Undertaker

TAG TEAMS
1. Harlem Heat
2. Owen Hart & Yokozuna
3. The Nasty Boys
4. Lex Luger & Davey Boy Smith
5. Tony Anthony & Tracey Smothers
6. Raven & Stevie Richards
7. PG-13
8. Bunkhouse Buck & Dick Slater
9. Bobby Eaton & Lord Steven Regal
10. Public Enemy
11. The Gangstas
12. The Rock 'n' Roll Express
13. Men on a Mission
14. The Smokin' Gunns
15. Eli & Jacob Blu

WCW
World champion: Hulk Hogan
1. Sting
2. Randy Savage
3. The Renegade
4. Big Van Vader
5. Ric Flair
6. Meng
7. Dallas Page
8. Kamala
9. Paul Orndorff
10. Hacksaw Duggan

WWF
World champion: Diesel
1. Jeff Jarrett
2. Savio Vega
3. Adam Bomb
4. Shawn Michaels
5. Bam Bam Bigelow
6. Sid Vicious
7. Mabel
8. Bret Hart
9. Jean-Pierre Lafitte
10. The Undertaker

MOST POPULAR
1. Shawn Michaels
2. Hulk Hogan
3. Sting
4. Diesel
5. Bret Hart
6. Razor Ramon
7. Bam Bam Bigelow
8. The Undertaker
9. Randy Savage
10. Savio Vega

MOST HATED
1. Sid Vicious
2. Bob Backlund
3. Jerry Lawler
4. Jeff Jarrett
5. Kevin Sullivan
6. Ric Flair
7. Mabel
8. Meng
9. Kama
10. Arn Anderson

Benoit controls Adam Bomb with a rear chinlock. He went on to lose the match with the WWF mid-carder, but DiBiase was reportedly still interested in signing him to a long-term deal.

dominated from the outset and put Sabu away in spectacularly gruesome fashion, breaking a pair of vertebrae in Sabu's neck with a suplex. The madman from Bombay was in such agony that he was rushed to the hospital and replaced mid-match by 911. Benoit's performance earned him a new nickname: "The Crippler."

That ended DiBiase's pursuit of Sabu. It was believed at the time that he was damaged goods (though that, of course, was proven to be wrong). DiBiase's henchman made a mental note to himself and sought out Benoit after the card. The two were seen huddling briefly in the back corridors of the ECW Arena.

"Ted was definitely interested in Chris after hearing about that incident and seeing it on videotape," said a confidant of DiBiase. "He rarely throws away good prospects and never tips his hand early. He had to be impressed. Very impressed."

However, sources say there were no conversations between them until recently, when Bam Bam Bigelow was booted from The Million-Dollar Corporation following embarrassing losses to Lawrence Taylor and Diesel. The

current members weren't exactly wreaking havoc, and DiBiase suddenly found himself down a man. In late-May, he opened the lines of discussion with Benoit.

A source close to the negotiations said it went down like this: DiBiase used his influence to make it easier for Benoit to receive a coveted WWF contract. In exchange, DiBiase arranged a deal with Benoit that was said to be rich with incentives, meaning that Benoit had to maintain a certain level of success in the WWF in order to become a full-fledged

Benoit was able to outbrawl and dominate Bomb, who was eight inches taller and 74 pounds heavier, when the match spilled out of the ring (below), and his sliding kick (left) sent Bomb reeling. Benoit's technical skills and killer instinct were what interested DiBiase most.

DiBiase had a close associate scout *Sabu* when he was wrestling Benoit in ECW. When he left the building that night, however, he was more impressed by Benoit, who had earned the nickname "The Crippler" with one crunching suplex.

In spite of his loss to Bomb (and others) at a round of WWF TV tapings in June '95, Benoit did earn a contract with the company. Okay, so it was almost five years later when it happened ... and DiBiase was long gone!

member of the Corporation. Benoit reportedly stalled and asked for more money.

"It's a can't-lose deal for DiBiase," the source said. "If Benoit wins, DiBiase wins. If Benoit loses, DiBiase loses next to nothing. Plus, he gets a true read on how big a competitive fire burns inside Benoit. That's something he has questioned in just about everybody in his federation. He got burned once with Bigelow. He's too smart to get burned again."

Benoit had a rough debut in the WWF, but he has too much raw talent for that to continue. The moniker he received in ECW is actually a misnomer. Benoit is considered one of the best scientific wrestlers in the world and has always maintained that the only reason he has failed to win a major title was because he was a victim of the sport's politics.

Of course, being known as "The Crippler" for breaking an opponent's neck certainly doesn't hurt. And with DiBiase providing guidance, Chris Benoit may finally have the break he needs to become a champion. □

INSIDE WRESTLING, November 1995

The cover: We made quite the bold demand of WCW, stating that we wanted to see Hulk Hogan stripped of the World championship. Our reasoning was that he had only put the 15 pounds of gold on the line once during a four-month period. Even if WCW champions weren't obligated to defend at least once every 30 days, one defense in four months was ridiculous (though some of his associates offered feeble excuses). Of course, Hogan had been criticized for infrequent world title defenses in the past ... and our demand was ignored.

Samoan Swap? *Inside Wrestling* learned of a very unusual plan Capt. Lou Albano had in the works. Seems he wasn't thrilled with the recent performances of his WWF charges, The Headshrinkers (Fatu and Sionne). Meanwhile, another veteran Samoan duo—The Samoan Swat Team—was excelling in the upstart AWF under Jim Garvin. Albano acknowledged that he had been watching the S.S.T., yet he claimed he wasn't threatening to replace his guys with them. As it turned out, no such swap ever occurred.

Fear Of Flying: Sensational young high-flyer Alex Wright was looking forward to a Great American Bash showdown with fellow aerialist Brian Pillman—that is, until he fell asleep the night before the pay-per-view. He was haunted by nightmares throughout his fitful sleep, awful dreams in which he broke his neck in the Pillman match. Even after arriving at the arena, he wasn't sure he could get through the bout. He didn't snap out of his funk until Pillman dropkicked him. Wright ended up winning what was an exciting match.

New Generation Rocks: The WWF made a solid effort to create stars of a new generation in the mid-1990s, and never was that more evident than at King of the Ring 1995. The Undertaker, Shawn Michaels, and Yokozuna were expected to dominate the tournament, but none made it past the quarterfinals. Instead, it was Savio Vega beating Road Dogg in the semifinals to advance to the finals against eventual winner Mabel, who got a bye when Shawn Michaels went to a draw with Kama (The Godfather) in the quarters.

Tatanka Talk: One of the least popular wrestlers in the WWF, Tatanka, got his chance to speak out in "Hotseat." About nine months earlier, he shocked a lot of loyal fans by turning heel and joining Ted DiBiase's Million-Dollar Corporation. Although the turn didn't lead to a lot of big wins for Tatanka, he didn't care to talk about it in those terms. Rather, he said he made the right move because it—actually, DiBiase—made him a lot richer than he had ever been before.

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WEAR-DOWN HOLDS

1. Airplane spin	21. Face rake	41. Leg lock
2. Arm drag	22. Fireman's carry ram	42. Leg sweep
3. Arm lock	23. Flying body press	43. Manager interference
4. Asian spike	24. Flying clothesline	44. Monkey flip
5. Atomic drop	25. Flying drop kick	45. Overhead toss
6. Bear hug	26. Flying elbow drop	46. Pole ram
7. Bite	27. Flying head butt	47. Reverse chin lock
8. Body slam	28. Flying mare	48. Rolling scissors
9. Body tackle	29. Forearm smash	49. Rope burn
10. Bulldog	30. Foreign object	50. Russian sickle
11. Chicken wing	31. Full nelson	51. Savate kick
12. Choke slam	32. Giant swing	52. Scissors grip
13. Claw	33. Grapevine	53. Shoulder breaker
14. Clothesline	34. Hair pull	54. Slingshot
15. Cross body block	35. Hammer lock	55. Snap mare
16. Double axehandle	36. Head lock	56. Step-over toe hold
17. Drop kick	37. Head stomp	57. Suplex
18. Eagle split	38. Hip roll	58. Surfboard
19. Elbow smash	39. Irish whip	59. Turnbuckle smash
20. Eye gouge	40. Knee drop	60. Wrist lock

SET-UP HOLDS

61. Abdominal stretch	71. Cradle	81. Power bomb
62. Avalanche	72. Crucifix	82. Power slam
63. Backbreaker	73. DDT	83. Scorpion deathlock
64. Backroll press	74. Figure four	84. Sleeper
65. Belly to belly	75. Flying leg drop	85. Slingshot suplex
66. Big splash	76. Gourd buster	86. Spine buster
67. Boston crab	77. Hurricanrana	87. Stunner
68. Brain buster	78. Moonsault	88. Sunset flip
69. Camel clutch	79. Neckbreaker	89. Superplex
70. Cobra clutch	80. Piledriver	90. Texas cloverleaf

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WRESTLER'S NAME (DO NOT USE ANY REAL PRO WRESTLER NAMES) _____

WEAR-DOWN HOLDS: *Choose 10 of the holds at the left numbered 1-60. Only use a hold once.*

1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____

6 _____ 7 _____ 8 _____ 9 _____ 10 _____

SET-UP HOLDS: *Choose 5 of the holds at the left numbered 61-90. Only use a hold once.*

1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____

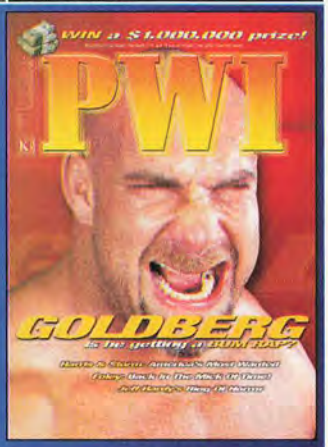
FINISHING HOLD: *Create your own custom final maneuver or choose a hold from our list.*

_____

between falls

PRO WRESTLING ILLUSTRATED welcomes readers' comments on any of our stories or columns. Send letters to: BETWEEN FALLS Box 1148, Ft. Washington, PA 19034
Or you can e-mail your comments to prowrestlingillustrated@yahoo.com
Letters preceded by a ☎ indicate letters left by fans on the *PWI* Hotline (1-900-226-4PWI; see ad elsewhere in this issue).

IS GOLDBERG TO BLAME?



Was Linda McMahon right to label Bill Goldberg's debut as "disappointing" during a conference call with investors this summer, insinuating that he was partly to blame for WWE's financial slump? We addressed that question, among others, in our December 2003 cover story, "Goldberg: Is He Getting A Bum Rap?" Here's a sampling of reader opinion.

"I don't think it was Goldberg's idea to wear Goldust's wig, or to have The Rock call him 'ol' whisker biscuit,'" wrote Chris Mathers of Philadelphia. "Linda just refuses to take responsibility for WWE's failures."

Betsy Hartner of Nashua, New Hampshire, believes Linda's comment was blown out of proportion. "Linda just said that Goldberg's run was disappointing, and that was an honest statement. She didn't say he was responsible for that."

"Let's keep this in perspective: Goldberg is only doing what he's told," stated Mike Barducci of Boston. "Whenever I have heard about Goldberg protesting about something, his reasoning seems to be valid. So what if Goldberg was reluctant to appear at Insurrextion? He was sticking to the terms of his contract.

NO FEMALES IN THE "500"?

Congratulations on another great *"PWI* 500" issue (*PWI Presents*/Fall 2003), but I do have one complaint. Although I wish Chris Jericho and Chris Benoit were a bit higher, my main beef is that no women made the rankings this year.

Women's wrestling has finally become an important aspect of the business. Stars like Molly Holly, Victoria, and Trish Stratus definitely should have been included in the "500." In fact, I would suggest rankings in the top 100 for those ladies.

Plenty of female indy wrestlers deserved spots, too. Sweet Sarah, a local diva, was the first female to main event a Halifax Forum show, wrestle for the Canadian unified junior heavyweight title, and participate in the Women's Super 8 in WXW. Doesn't that deserve recognition in the "500"?

THOMAS J. HALEY
St. John, New Brunswick

IGNORING THE PAST

Why can't WWE acknowledge the careers that its superstars have enjoyed in other promotions? Take Teddy Long. Any wrestling fan who was around in the late-1980s will remember that he had a similar managerial gimmick in WCW. Today, Long is claiming that Rodney Mack and Jazz are receiving unfair treatment. Years ago, he was saying the same about Butch Reed and Ron Simmons. If WWE acknowledged Long's past, it might give his current storyline more depth.

The same is true of Rey Misterio Jr. During a recent *Confidential,* Misterio's face was hidden from view, giving the impression that he has never been seen without his mask. Most fans will remember that Misterio lost his mask in WCW. WWE should make better use of its WCW library to supplement today's storylines.

I've been watching wrestling since the late-'70s, when the business was divided into territories. WWE should have more respect for fans like me.

WWE would probably like its fans to think this man, Rey Misterio Jr., has never wrestled without a mask. Long-time WCW fans know that's not the case. This irks reader Donald Stough.

DONALD STOUGH
Hctubb3@aol.com

SICKENED BY *SMACKDOWN*

The October 9 edition of *Smackdown* illustrated everything that is wrong with WWE. How does WWE top an excellent match between cruiserweight champion Tajiri and Ultimo Dragon? By having Eddie Guerrero spray The Big Show with sewage at the end of the show. Considering Smackdown's fabulous roster, why do we need this crap?

We can add this to gems such as Vince McMahon's "Kiss My Ass" Club, Mae Young giving birth to a hand, and Katie Vick. I have one question for WWE brass: Are you that desperate for viewers, or are you just sick? I'm sure a lot of *Smackdown* viewers were sorry they skipped the Yankees-Red Sox ALCS game on another channel.

By the way, does anyone know how I can get NWA-TNA in San Antonio so I can watch some real wrestling?

REY SIFUENTES JR.
San Antonio, TX

"HULKAMANIA" IN TNA

When Jeff Jarrett attacked Hulk Hogan in Japan, and then it was confirmed that Jarrett would defend the NWA title against Hogan in the main event of a three-hour pay-per-view, I was convinced that TNA would follow WCW's path to challenging WWE. Now that Hogan is sidelined with a knee injury, and the TNA pay-per-view has been postponed until early-2004, I suppose those plans are on hold.

Many of my friends suggest that Hogan is too old and washed-up to revolutionize the wrestling industry again. Those people have already forgotten how Hulk Hogan's match against The Rock at WrestleMania X8 demonstrated the power of "Hulkamania." Even if Hogan doesn't stick around for long, I think Hogan vs. Jarrett can do for TNA what Hogan vs. Flair did for WCW in the mid-1990s.

ANNIE AMUNDSEN
International Falls, MN

Whether Ric Flair (shown cheating to win against Sting) is the greatest wrestler of the 20th century is up for debate, but W.G. Hixson would cast his vote for the "Nature Boy."

RATINGS REQUEST

I bought the very first issue of PRO WRESTLING ILLUSTRATED back in 1979, and I've missed only one issue in the 24 years since that time. You put out a great publication, and the official ratings are my favorite part of the magazine. I realize you already provide top 10 ratings for both Japan and Mexico, but I think you should break it down further by including individual promotions, perhaps among the indy rankings.

Mexico's EMLL and AAA, Puerto Rico's IWA and WWC, and Japan's NJPW, AJPW, and NOAH are worthy of at least occasional spots. This would allow us wrestling junkies to be more informed with the international scene.

WAYNE KJELSRUD
waynek@coffey.com

FLAIR FOR GREATNESS

Now that we've reached the year 2003, it's time for *PWI* to name the best wrestler of the 20th century. In one special publication a few years ago, *Wrestling: The Best Of The 20th Century,* you named the top 100 wrestlers but didn't rank them. If you ever decided to choose one premier wrestler, I'm sure the debate would boil down to either Hulk Hogan or Ric Flair. My choice would be Flair … and here are my key arguments:

His remarkable comeback. Flair broke his back in an airplane crash and later rose to the top of his sport. What other athlete has a story like that?

World title dominance. Flair wouldn't have reigned in the NWA, WCW, or the WWF if he didn't put butts in seats. As champion, Flair drove ratings and attendance.

Believability. When Flair went into his "To be the man …" promos, you believed what he was saying because *he* seemed to believe what he was saying. Fans bought it, even if they had seen him drive up to the arena in a 1979 Pinto two hours before.

Also Sprach Zarathustra. The theme from *2001: A Space Odyssey* lets you know that you are about to experience something on a grand scale. Of the billions of people on this planet, only two humans have made this piece of music uniquely theirs. One is Ric Flair, and the other was a leather-clad mama's boy out of Memphis (no, not Jerry Lawler).

This man qualifies as the greatest wrestler of the 20th century. Make it official, *PWI!*

W.G. HIXSON
Demonmaster62@aol.com □

PWI Hotline Extra!

Your answers to our question of the week!

Question of the Week: Would you like to see Hulk Hogan return to WWE for a retirement tour before he permanently retires? (October 14 to 20, 2003)

Hotline callers respond: "Hogan's career wouldn't be complete without a proper sendoff from WWE," said David Horton of Temecula, California. "I know WWE doesn't like to call attention to someone leaving the fold, but Hogan should be the exception."

"Just think of all the WWE wrestlers who haven't received farewell tours," noted Katrina Vandenberg of Hornell, New York. "We all would have loved to have said goodbye to Hawk, Curt Hennig, and Elizabeth. Hogan deserves a tribute."

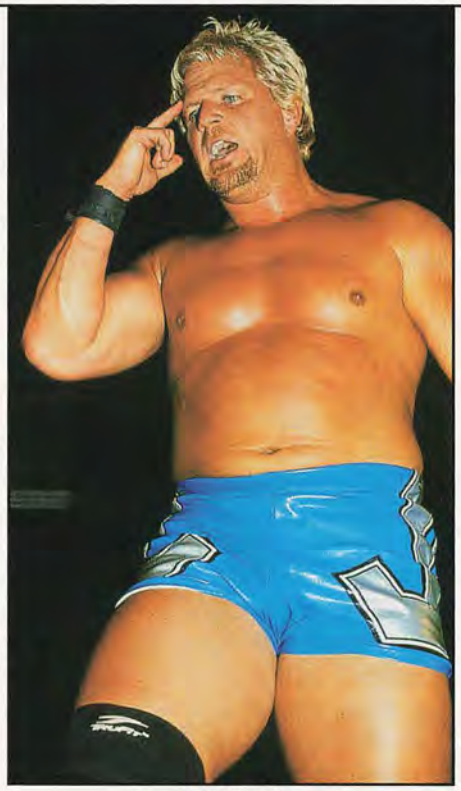
"As excited as I am about the rumors that Hogan might show up in TNA, I don't want him to end his career there," said Anthony Blankenship of Birmingham, Alabama. "Although I know the retirement wouldn't stick, the spectacle of it would be fun."

PWI official ratings

For period ended November 1, 2003

TOP 10

1. **BROCK LESNAR**
   295, Minneapolis, MN
   (1) WWE Smackdown champion
2. **BILL GOLDBERG**
   283, Tulsa, OK
   (2) WWE Raw champion
3. **JEFF JARRETT**
   230, Nashville, TN
   (-) NWA heavyweight champion
4. **KENTA KOBASHI**
   282, Fukuchiyama, Japan
   (4) GHC heavyweight champion
5. **THE UNDERTAKER**
   304, Dallas, TX
   (-) No. 1 contender: WWE Smackdown title
6. **TOSHIAKI KAWADA**
   245, Ashikaga, Japan
   (7) All-Japan Triple Crown champion
7. **TRIPLE-H**
   269, Greenwich, CT
   (5) No. 1 contender: WWE Raw title
8. **KURT ANGLE**
   233, Pittsburgh, PA
   (3) No. 2 contender: WWE Smackdown title
9. **KANE**
   326, St. Louis, MO
   (9) No. 2 contender: WWE Raw title
10. **YOSHIHIRO TAKAYAMA**
    270, Sapporo, Japan
    (10) IWGP heavyweight champion



Jeff Jarrett

TAG TEAMS

1. **BUH BUH RAY & D-VON DUDLEY**
   Combined weight: 579 pounds
   (1) WWE Raw tag team champions
2. **TAMON HONDA & KENTA KOBASHI**
   Combined weight: 547 pounds
   (7) GHC tag team champions
3. **THE BASHAM BROTHERS**
   Combined weight: 492 pounds
   (-) WWE Smackdown tag team champions
4. **ROB CONWAY & RENE DUPREE**
   Combined weight: 490 pounds
   (-) No. 1 contenders: WWE Raw tag title
5. **SIMON DIAMOND & JOHNNY SWINGER**
   Combined weight: 461 pounds
   (6) NWA tag team champions
6. **HIROSHI TANAHASHI & YUTAKA YOSHIE**
   Combined weight: 484 pounds
   (4) IWGP International tag team champions
7. **SHELTON BENJAMIN & CHARLIE HAAS**
   Combined weight: 510 pounds
   (3) No. 1 contenders: WWE Smackdown tag title
8. **KEIJI MUTO & ARASHI**
   Combined weight: 471 pounds
   (-) All-Japan International tag team champions
9. **EDDIE & CHAVO GUERRERO JR.**
   Combined weight: 408 pounds
   (2) No. 2 contenders: WWE Smackdown tag title
10. **GARRISON CADE & MARK JINDRAK**
    Combined weight: 506 pounds
    (-) No. 2 contenders: WWE Raw tag title

WWE RAW

Raw Champion:
BILL GOLDBERG
(C) 283, Tulsa, OK

1—**TRIPLE-H**
(1) 269, Greenwich, CT
2—**KANE**
(2) 326, St. Louis, MO
3—**ROB VAN DAM**
(6) 237, Battle Creek, MI
4—**CHRIS JERICHO**
(5) 225, Winnipeg, Manitoba
5—**RANDY ORTON**
(4) 265, St. Louis, MO
6—**BATISTA**
(-) 318, Washington, DC
7—**SCOTT STEINER**
(9) 275, Detroit, MI
8—**MAVEN**
(10) 210, Chantilly, VA
9—**CHRISTIAN**
(3) 225, Toronto, Ontario
10—**SHAWN MICHAELS**
(8) 217, San Antonio, TX

WWE SMACKDOWN

Smackdown Champion:
BROCK LESNAR
(C) 295, Minneapolis, MN

1—**THE UNDERTAKER**
(3) 304, Dallas, TX
2—**KURT ANGLE**
(1) 233, Pittsburgh, PA
3—**THE BIG SHOW**
(5) 485, Aiken, SC
4—**JOHN CENA**
(4) 260, Los Angeles, CA
5—**EDDIE GUERRERO**
(2) 223, El Paso, TX
6—**CHRIS BENOIT**
(7) 224, Edmonton, Alberta
7—**TAJIRI**
(9) 213, Tokyo, Japan
8—**REY MISTERIO JR.**
(6) 163, San Diego, CA
9—**A-TRAIN**
(10) 353, Boston, MA
10—**JAMIE NOBLE**
(-) 190, Hanover, WV

OVW

OVW Champion:
MARK MAGNUS
(6) 231, Syracuse, NY

1—**JOHNNY JETER**
(C) 218, San Diego, CA
2—**MATT MORGAN**
(2) 330, Fairfield, CT
3—**NICK DINSMORE**
(1) 226, Jefferson, IN
4—**MATT CAPPOTELLI**
(-) 220, Norwich, NY
5—**ROB CONWAY**
(3) 240, Pittsburgh, PA
6—**HARDCORE HOLLY**
(-) 249, Mobile, AL
7—**JOHN HENNIGAN**
(-) 204, Los Angeles, CA
8—**MIKE MONDO**
(-) 185, Long Island City, NY
9—**CHRIS CAGE**
(10) 220, Youngstown, OH
10—**CARLY COLON**
(-) 210, San Turce, Puerto Rico

RING OF HONOR

ROH Champion:
SAMOA JOE
(C) 270, American Samoa

1—**HOMICIDE**
(2) 220, Brooklyn, NY
2—**XAVIER**
(-) 205, Queens, NY
3—**A.J. STYLES**
(7) 202, Gainesville, GA
4—**C.M. PUNK**
(6) 220, Chicago, IL
5—**CHRISTOPHER DANIELS**
(1) 210, Los Angeles, CA
6—**DANNY MAFF**
(9) 245, Brooklyn, NY
7—**RAVEN**
(8) 243, Short Hills, NJ
8—**B.J. WHITMER**
(5) 210, Owensboro, KY
9—**STEVE CORINO**
(10) 225, Sea Isle City, NJ
10—**MATT STRYKER**
(3) 220, Cincinnati, OH

Top 10 and Tag Team ratings are based on won-lost records for the past month, quality of opposition, and inherent skill of each wrestler or team. These ratings are compiled by the magazine's editorial board. All other ratings are based on the official current positions of challengers to the top title in each category; certain titleholders receive an automatic spot in the ratings. The number in parentheses indicates a wrestler's position in that category last issue; (-) indicates that the wrestler was not rated in that category last issue. while (C) indicates the wrestler was champion in that category last issue.

BAD 2 THE BONE WRESTLING: Champion—Vic the Bruiser; **1**—Randy Royal; **2**—J.C. Bailey; **3**—Simon Sezz; **4**—Apollo; **5**—Chuck Steele; **6**—Billy Black; **7**—Todd Morton; **8**—Steve Mariono; **9**—The Judge; **10**—Ms. Jade.

BORDER CITY WRESTLING: Champion—Shane Douglas; **1**—D-Lo Brown; **2**—Johnny Swinger; **3**—Chris Sabin; **4**—Eric Young; **5**—Dyson Pryce; **6**—Joe E. Legend; **7**—Bobby Rude; **8**—Alex Shelley; **9**—Kris Chambers; **10**—Petey Williams.

CENTRAL WRESTLING ALLIANCE: Champion—Barry D; **1**—Terry Alan; **2**—Shane Lewis; **3**—J.T. Money; **4**—Mongoose; **5**—Jad T. Lungini; **6**—Justen Idol; **7**—Boxcar Bruce; **8**—Skip Sherwood; **9**—Kandi Mae; **10**—Maddawg.

CHAMPIONSHIP PRO WRESTLING: Champion—Johnny Graham; **1**—Shane Shadows; **2**—Masked Superstar; **3**—Brock Singleton; **4**—Greg Valentine; **5**—Bob Keller; **6**—Brian Johnson; **7**—John Balsamo; **8**—Mercury Flash; **9**—Mikey Baritone; **10**—Zubov.

CHIKARA: Champion—Hallowicked; **1**—Mike Quackenbush; **2**—Jigsaw; **3**—Skayde; **4**—Eddie Kingston; **5**—Gran Akuma; **6**—Jack Marciano; **7**—Icarus; **8**—Sumie Sakai; **9**—UltraMantis; **10**—Jolly Roger.

INSANITY PRO WRESTLING: Champion—Hillbilly Jed; **1**—E.Z. Cruz; **2**—Necrobutcher; **3**—Simply Spectacular; **4**—Madman Pondo; **5**—J.C. Bailey; **6**—Tom Vanzant; **7**—Troy Vanzant; **8**—Polarious; **9**—Cliffton Crunk; **10**—P.T. Huslar.

NATIONAL WRESTLING LEAGUE: Champion—Morgus the Maniac; **1**—The Patriot; **2**—Tony Atlas; **3**—Samu; **4**—John Rambo; **5**—Gutterboy; **6**—King Kaluha; **7**—King Kong Bundy; **8**—Gangrel; **9**—Jake Davis; **10**—Kevin Featherstone.

NWA WILDSIDE: Champion—Onyx; **1**—Hotstuff Hernandez; **2**—Iceberg; **3**—Mikal Adryan; **4**—Rainman; **5**—Murder One; **6**—Azrael; **7**—Ray Gordy; **8**—Todd Sexton; **9**—Altar Boy Luke; **10**—Seth Delay.

PROFESSIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING: Champion—Shadow; **1**—Gabe Roach; **2**—Jared Steele; **3**—Mike Foxx; **4**—Sabu; **5**—Steve DeMarco; **6**—Chris Stevens; **7**—C-Diddy; **8**—Brett Barnes; **9**—Tim Storm; **10**—John Allen.

PRO WRESTLING IRON: Champion—Bison Smith; **1**—Mike Modest; **2**—Donovan Morgan; **3**—Vito Thomaselli; **4**—Mad Mikey; **5**—Joe Applebaumer; **6**—Sal Thomaselli; **7**—Hook Bomberry; **8**—Super Diablo; **9**—Apollo Kahn; **10**—J.D. Bishop.

PWF NORTHEAST: Champion—Kid Krazy; **1**—Billy Black; **2**—T.J. Richter; **3**—Luis Ortiz; **4**—Paul Hudson; **5**—Mike Anthony; **6**—El Diablo; **7**—Vince Vicallo; **8**—Adam Hastey; **9**—Ebony Blade; **10**—Johnny Curtis.

WORLD XTREME WRESTLING: Champion—Billy Dream; **1**—Slyk Wagner Brown; **2**—Gene Snisky; **3**—Sinn; **4**—Mana the Polynesian Warrior; **5**—Havoc; **6**—Afa Jr.; **7**—Nuisance; **8**—Boogalou; **9**—Jake Bishop; **10**—Samu.

NWA

NWA Champion:
JEFF JARRETT
(3) 230, Nashville, TN

1—A.J. STYLES
(C) 202, Gainesville, GA
2—J.T. WOLFEN
(–) 297, New Haven, CT
3—RAVEN
(1) 243, Short Hills, NJ
4—RICKY MURDOCH
(5) 261, Houston, TX
5—HOTSTUFF HERNANDEZ
(2) 280, Houston, TX
6—PRESTON QUINN
(–) 240, Gloucester, VA
7—PREDATOR
(–) 325, Hollywood, CA
8—SCOOT ANDREWS
(–) 222, Tampa, FL
9—ROB STARDOM
(–) 215, Winnipeg, Manitoba
10—CHANCE PROPHET
(–) 265, Chicago, IL

NWA-TNA

NWA Champion:
JEFF JARRETT
(5) 230, Nashville, TN

1—MICHAEL SHANE
(1) 221, San Antonio, TX
2—A.J. STYLES
(C) 202, Gainesville, GA
3—RAVEN
(2) 243, Short Hills, NJ
4—KID KASH
(–) 202, Johnson City, TN
5—CHRIS SABIN
(6) 207, Hell, MI
6—D-LO BROWN
(3) 281, Chicago, IL
7—JERRY LYNN
(4) 216, Minneapolis, MN
8—CHRISTOPHER DANIELS
(10) 210, Los Angeles, CA
9—VAMPIRO
(–) 220, Thunder Bay, Ontario
10—FRANKIE KAZARIAN
(9) 220, Yucca Valley, CA

JAPAN

1—KENTA KOBASHI
(1) 282, Fukuchiyama, Japan
GHC heavyweight champion
2—TOSHIAKI KAWADA
(2) 245, Ashikaga, Japan
All-Japan Triple Crown champion
3—YOSHIHIRO TAKAYAMA
(3) 270, Sapporo, Japan
IWGP heavyweight champion
4—HIROYOSHI TENZAN
(7) 270, Tokyo, Japan
5—KEIJI MUTO
(5) 245, Yamanashi, Japan
6—DON FRYE
(–) 231, Sierra Vista, AZ
7—MITSUHARU MISAWA
(10) 228, Ashikaga, Japan
8—KENDO KA SHIN
(8) 195, Tokyo, Japan
9—TAKASHI SUGIURA
(–) 209, Nagoya, Japan
10—YUJI NAGATA
(6) 228, Tokyo, Japan

MEXICO

1—SHOCKER
(4) 185, Guadalajara, Mexico
2—EL HIJO DEL SANTO
(2) 180, Tulancingo, Mexico
3—MR. NIEBLA
(1) 185, Cualtitlan, Mexico
4—HECTOR GARZA
(5) 220, Monterrey, Mexico
5—PERRO AGUAYO JR.
(3) 165, Zacatecas, Mexico
6—LATIN LOVER
(–) 190, Monterrey, Mexico
7—UNIVERSO DOS MIL
(–) 240, Mexico City, Mexico
8—BLACK TIGER
(10) 193, Mexico City, Mexico
9—PIERROTH JR.
(7) 251, Cuernavaca, Mexico
10—ULTIMO GUERRERO
(–) 173, Mexico City, Mexico

ratings analysis

Every month, this column will tell fans how we go about rating over 200 wrestlers in 22 different categories. It is a behind-the-scenes look at the most important–and respected–ratings system in the sport. This column is vital reading for all wrestling fans.

The Undertaker's last stand? Honestly, no, it's probably not. "Big Evil" is a lot like **Ric Flair** in at least a few ways: The quality of his matches doesn't seem to decrease much as he gets older. He remains entertaining and charismatic, and every time you think he's ready to make his one last run at the big belt … it doesn't turn out to be his last run after all.

The Undertaker

That's why after ranking him number five overall in this issue, we're going to resist calling this 'Taker's last run at the top of the card in WWE. We won't even list all the physical ailments he has (there are many). But we will tell you that you might see the UT of old sometime in the first half of 2004. That's right, the "Dead Man" version of The Undertaker is rumored to be making a return. If that rumor turns out to be true, we have a feeling 'Taker's Smackdown title match with **Brock Lesnar** at No Mercy—which UT lost due to **Vince McMahon's** interference—won't be the last one he receives on a big pay-per-view. Mr. Lesnar could have his first meeting with "The Dead Man" a lot sooner than he thinks.

***Tough Enough?* Darn right!** For those of you hoping to see a fourth season of *Tough Enough,* don't hold your breath. That's a real shame, not only for the many fans of the reality show, but for WWE itself. Take a close look at this issue's ratings and you'll see *Tough Enough* all over.

Okay, not all the *Tough Enough* winners have blossomed into great *wrestlers,* but they have done well for themselves. **Maven**, the male winner of the first competition, is ranked eighth in the Raw ratings, and his star is on the rise. WWE is said to have big plans for him in 2004 and beyond. **Nidia**, the first female *TE* winner, has her main squeeze, **Jamie Noble**, back in the Smackdown top 10—at number 10—this month. Although she usually just seconds Noble, she has shown some potential on the rare occasions WWE has booked her to wrestle. She and Noble seemed to be almost forgotten by Creative for a good chunk of 2003, but both look like they could be coming back strong after Nidia was blinded by a mouthful of **Tajiri's** toxic mist. They are seeking revenge!

Season two of *Tough Enough* gave us the controversial selections of **Jackie Gayda** and **Linda Miles**. Miss Jackie is the only *TE* winner not represented in this set of *PWI* ratings. She and the bizarre **Rico** make for an entertaining pair, but they are relegated to *Sunday Night Heat* duties on most weeks. Look for Jackie to cozy up to a more prominent Raw star.

Miles has enjoyed a lot more success thus far, reinventing herself as **Shaniqua**, the dominatrix manager of **The Basham Brothers**. The Bashams captured the Smackdown tag title thanks in part to Shaniqua just weeks before these ratings were compiled. We ranked them third in the tag team ratings in this issue. Shaniqua could have herself a nice career in WWE, as she has already shown no fear in standing up to **Bradshaw** and other male stars.

Shaniqua

If you check the Ohio Valley Wrestling ratings, you might notice the names of **Matt Cappotelli** (fourth) and **John Hennigan** (seventh). Yep, those are the two winners of the third season of *Tough Enough,* and they're developing quite nicely under the tutelage of **Jim Cornette** and **Danny Davis** in OVW. Cappotelli has rekindled his feud with *TE* trainer **Hardcore Holly** in OVW, and both he and Hennigan are getting the occasional opportunity to wrestle on WWE house shows already. Don't be surprised if they're soon promoted.

Also worth mentioning are **Matt Morgan**, a *Tough Enough 2* alumnus who had to drop out due to injury, and original *Tough Enough* also-ran **Christopher Nowinski**. We have ranked Morgan number two in OVW, and he was scheduled to be part of Lesnar's Survivor Series team in WWE. There are many who believe he has the most long-term potential of *anyone* who participated in any of the seasons of *Tough Enough.* We'll all get to judge that soon enough.

The news isn't good for the charismatic Nowinski, who seemed to be on a faster track to stardom than Maven at one point. He has been suffering from post-concussion syndrome in recent months and might never be able to wrestle again.

That's about it! As always, if you have any questions or comments regarding our ratings or what you see here, we want to hear from you. Write to: "Ratings Analysis," c/o *PWI,* Box 1148, Fort Washington, PA 19034. □

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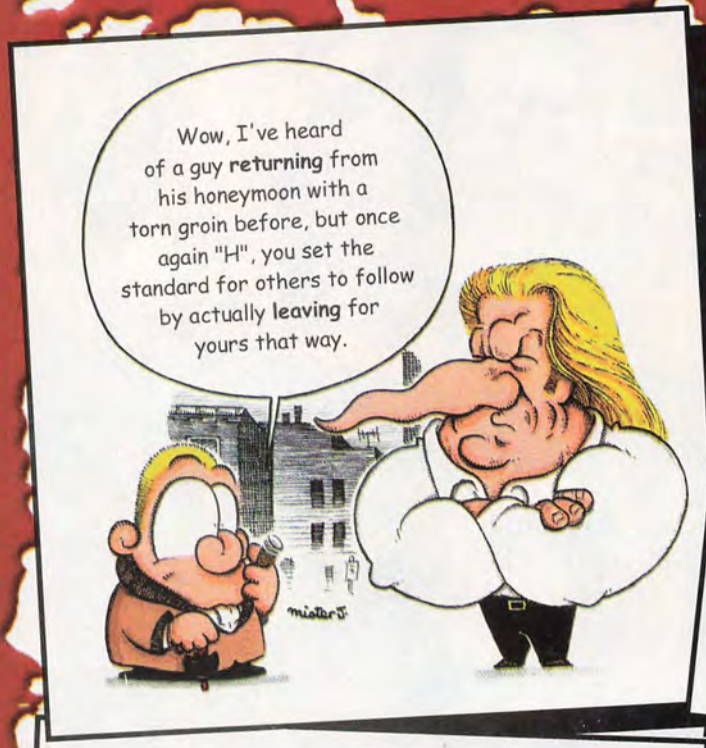
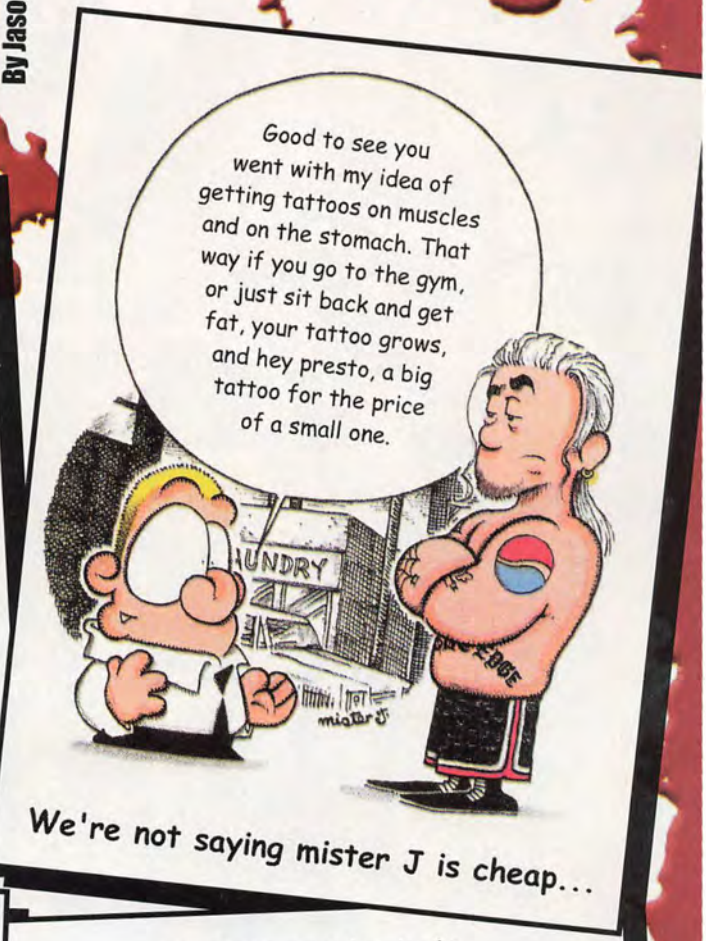
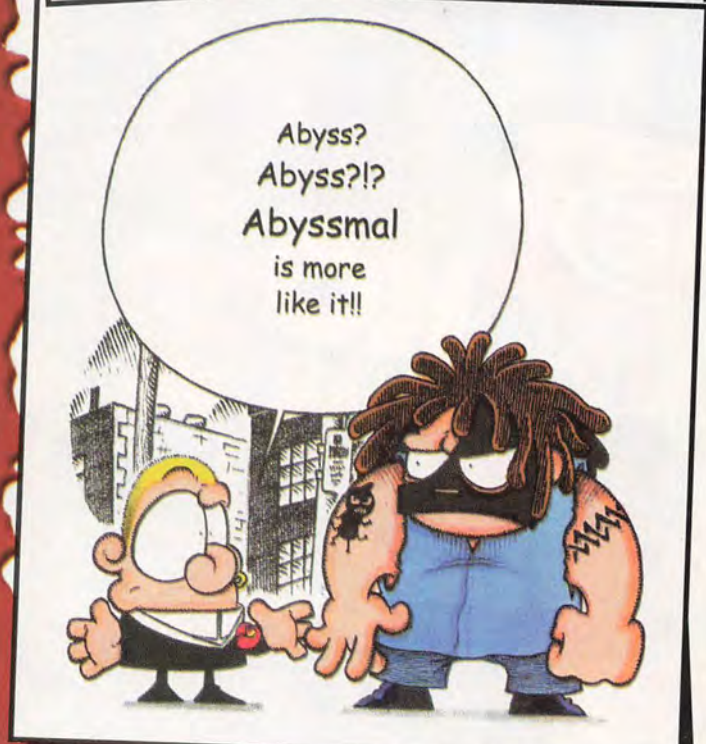
Drawing Blood

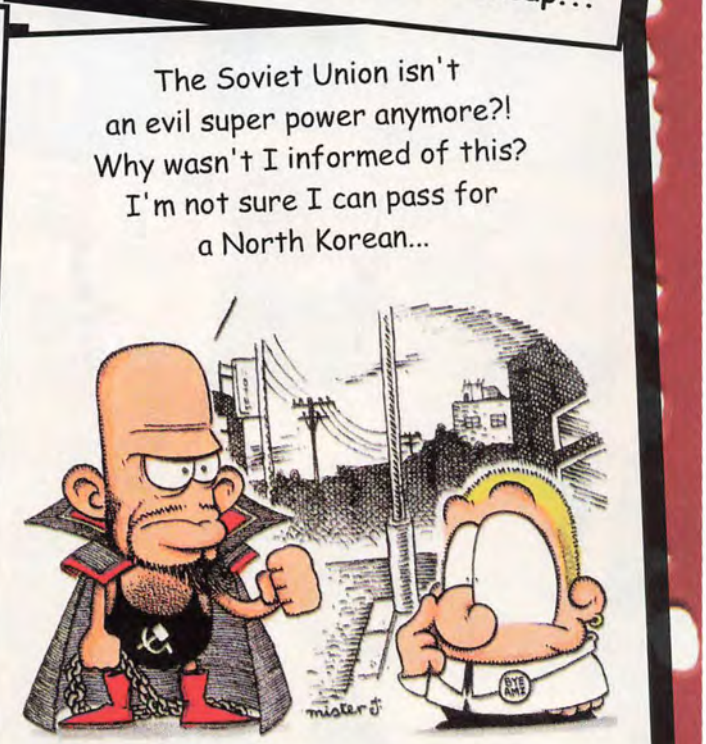
By Jason Conlan


Wow, I've heard of a guy **returning** from his honeymoon with a torn groin before, but once again "H", you set the standard for others to follow by actually **leaving** for yours that way.
mister J


Good to see you went with my idea of getting tattoos on muscles and on the stomach. That way if you go to the gym, or just sit back and get fat, your tattoo grows, and hey presto, a big tattoo for the price of a small one.
UNDRY
mister J

We're not saying mister J is cheap...




The Soviet Union isn't an evil super power anymore?! Why wasn't I informed of this? I'm not sure I can pass for a North Korean...
mister J

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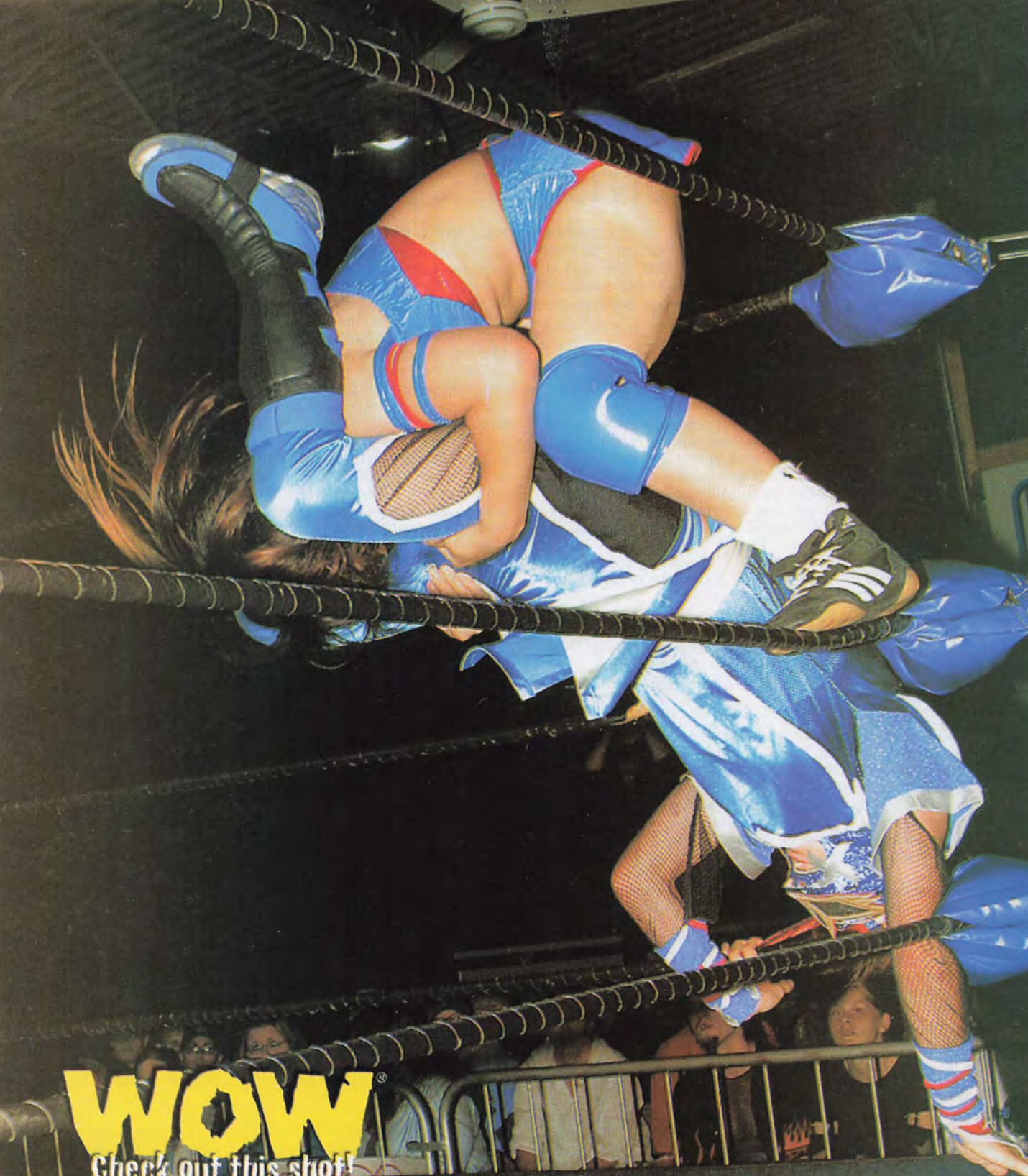

WOW®

Check out this shot!

Sumie Sakai has to be one of the toughest female wrestlers of whom you've probably never heard a darn thing. She isn't particularly big (5'1", 118) or particularly strong, but she's just as comfortable and confident in the ring against men as she is against women. And she's had her share of success against men as well. Maybe it has something to do with her judo background, or the fact that she has tremendous quickness. Or, after looking at this picture of her against Ran Maru in a Midwest Pro Wrestling bout in Maple Grove, Minnesota, maybe it has a lot to do with her ability to withstand a lot of punishment. That top-rope huracanrana from Maru had to hurt!

Photo by Wayne McCarty

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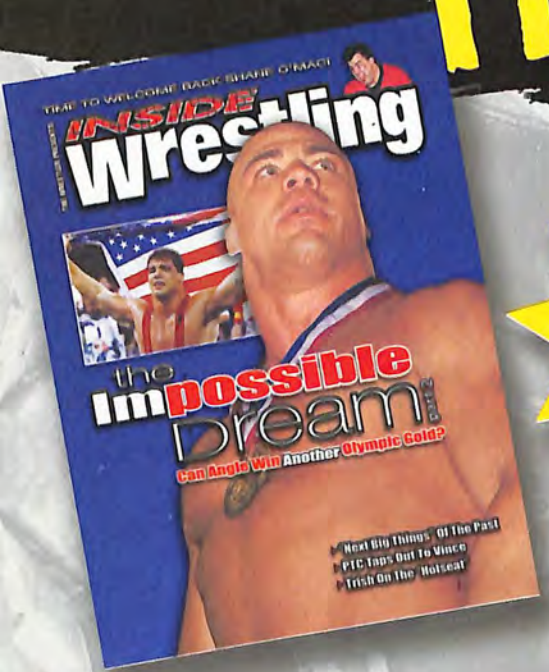
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